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**The “Perio-Cardio Connection”: How Gum Health Affects Your Heart**

(February, 2012) Medical research and information has pointed to an important link between the health of your gums and the health of your heart since at least 2007. For example, according to the American Academy of Periodontology website (perio.org), research shows that people with gum disease are almost twice as likely to suffer from coronary artery disease. It’s known as the “perio-cardio connection.” Here’s the background.

In 2007 the New England Journal of Medicine published research that suggested “intensive periodontal treatment may reverse atherosclerosis by improving elasticity of the arteries, or endothelial function.” In that study, correcting serious tooth and gum problems appeared to reverse hardening of the arteries. Just as important, it was evidence of the perio-cardio connection.

Then in 2009, the American Journal of Cardiology and the Journal of Periodontology published a joint paper developed by cardiologists and periodontists. The paper contained clinical recommendations for dentists and doctors to use in managing patients with — or at risk for — gum or heart disease. Based on the recommendations, cardiologists could examine a patient’s mouth, and periodontists could ask questions about heart health and family history of heart disease.

There are several theories about the link. Dr. Kenneth Kornmann, one of the authors of the 2009 paper said, “Inflammation is a major risk factor for heart disease, and periodontal disease may increase the inflammation level throughout the body.” The idea is that the inflammation caused by gum disease causes plaque build-up on the walls of the arteries. Another theory is that oral bacteria attach to fatty plaques in the blood stream and cause clots to form. In patients with hardening of the arteries, the clots can eventually lead to heart attacks.

Knowing about the perio-cardio connection helps medical and dental professionals identify, assess and guide patients at risk of cardiovascular disease related to periodontal disease. For patients, it reinforces the importance of regular, effective dental hygiene and care. Also that they may find themselves discussing heart health with their dentist, or getting an oral exam by their cardiologist.