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Infectious periodontitis is more than just teeth and gums

Growing need for enhanced communications between dentists and physicians

NEW YORK—An estimated 80 percent of adult Americans have some form of periodontal disease, a bacterial infection of the gums surrounding the teeth. But, this infection affects more than one's teeth and gums, said Robert J. Genco, DDS, PhD, distinguished professor of oral biology and microbiology, State University of New York at Buffalo.

"Periodontal disease is a serious condition that may have an effect on overall health. It is well known that runaway periodontal infections can travel into the neck and chest, and lodge in the lungs, brain, or heart," he said. "The more common chronic gum diseases may contribute to the risk for heart disease and stroke, premature births, worsening diabetic control and lung infections in the infirm."

Dr. Genco spoke today at the American Medical Association and American Dental Association media briefing, Oral & Systemic Health: Exploring the Connection, in New York City. He provided an overview of the research associating periodontal infections to other systemic ailments.

The fact that the mouth is connected to the rest of the body is often overlooked, said Dr. Genco. "The idea that dentists treat the mouth and physicians treat the rest of the body needs to be rethought because new research indicates that there may a cause-and-effect relationship between oral health and specific systemic health conditions."

Dr. Genco, who has researched oral diseases for more than 30 years, explained that the level of evidence related to the relationship between periodontal disease and these systemic conditions varies and includes case control, cross-sectional, and longitudinal epidemiologic studies.

"Perhaps the strongest evidence for a relationship comes from well-controlled intervention studies, where prevention or treatment of periodontal disease reduces the occurrence or severity of the systemic condition under study," said Dr. Genco. "Pilot intervention studies show that treatment of

periodontal disease improves metabolic control in patients with diabetes, reduces preterm birth in high risk pregnant women, and reduces pneumonia in patients in intensive care units."

He is careful to add that more rigorous studies are needed and are currently underway.

"If larger studies on diverse populations support the effects of periodontal management on these systemic conditions," he predicts, "we may be able to propose treatment of individual patients and public health preventive measures that will lead to medically necessary periodontal disease management.

In the meantime, Dr. Genco stressed the need for teamwork and enhanced communication. "Both dentists and physicians work hard to care for their patients and keep them healthy. By working together, they will be able to provide the appropriate integration of medical and dental care that best serves all of their patient's health care needs."

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