

Millions of Americans May Be at Risk for Serious Health Problems Due to Gum Disease

CHICAGO, July 9, 1998 – A new analysis of recent research has revealed gum disease may represent a far more serious threat to the health of millions of Americans than previously realized. These studies found that periodontal (gum) infection may contribute to the development of heart disease, the nation's number one cause of death, increase the risk of premature, underweight births, and pose a serious threat to people whose health is already compromised due to diabetes and respiratory diseases.

"It seems clear that gum disease, far from being just an oral health problem, actually represents a significant health risk to millions of people," said [Robert Genco](#), D.D.S., Ph.D., editor-in-chief of the *Journal of Periodontology*.

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The article, a first in the oral health field, is a comprehensive analysis of research on periodontal disease and its link to systemic conditions. It supports what many scientists have suspected for years -- that oral infections such as periodontal disease can adversely affect conditions outside the mouth. This compilation of current research studies on this link is being published in the *Annals of Periodontology* concurrently with the article in the *Journal of Periodontology*.

To help people learn more about this health concern, The American Academy of Periodontology (AAP) is launching a national public education campaign which will include a toll-free consumer information number (1-800-FLOSS-EM), interactive Web site (www.perio.org) where questions about oral health and gum disease will be answered by an Academy periodontist, and educational materials on the link between gum disease and heart disease, diabetes, respiratory disease and premature, low birth-weight births.

Dr. Genco noted the goal of the campaign will be to educate Americans about periodontal infection and its associated general health risks.

"Periodontal disease is characterized by inflammation and bacterial infection of the gums surrounding the teeth. The bacteria that are associated with periodontal disease can travel into the bloodstream to other parts of the body, and that puts health at risk," said Dr. Genco. "People think of gum disease in terms of their teeth, but they don't think about the fact that gum disease is a serious infection that can release bacteria into the bloodstream. The end result could mean additional health risks for people whose health is already affected by other diseases -- or lead to serious complications like heart disease."

According to Hal Slavkin, D.D.S., director of the National Institute of Dental Research (NIDR), studies supported by the NIDR have shown an intriguing association between periodontal infections and a number of systemic disorders. "We're very

interested in these findings because of the potential significance to public health if it turns out periodontal infection is a risk factor for other diseases. The Institute will continue to support this promising line of research into the connection between oral and systemic health," said Dr. Slavkin.

"Many Americans have oral exams each year to check for cavities and tooth decay. This research shows it is equally important to pay attention to gums. Having a periodontal screening and evaluation could help protect the overall health of millions," said Timothy Rose, D.D.S., M.S., president of The American Academy of Periodontology. "There are often no symptoms of gum disease in its early stages, so people need to make sure their dentist or periodontist checks their gums regularly."

According to Dr. Rose, research establishing the link between periodontal disease and systemic conditions is compelling, and additional research will help to further define the nature of these links.

The AAP is a 7,900-member organization of dentists specializing in the prevention, diagnosis and treatment of tissues surrounding the teeth and in the placement and maintenance of dental implants. Periodontics is one of eight dental specialties recognized by the American Dental Association.

For more information, contact the AAP Public Affairs Department at 312/573-3243 or 312/573-3242.