



DIABETES: THE ORAL HEALTH SCOURGE

Diabetes is a growing problem in Singapore. In 2014, around 440,000 residents aged 18 and above suffer from diabetes. World Health Organization (WHO) studies have proven diabetes leads to worsening of gum disease. Since scientific studies have shown a strong correlation between oral health and heart function, this serves as a double whammy for diabetes patients, who are already at risk of cardiovascular events.

Diabetes can cause other oral complications, such as tooth loss which in turn may lead to a compromise in lifestyle and dietary restrictions. This will, in turn, negatively impact diabetic control. In short, it creates a vicious cycle of poor health for the patients. Conversely, good gum health and/or properly treated gum disease can lead to better diabetes control. So treating both diseases has positive effects on each other.

So, what is gum disease? What does this mean for the man in the street and people with diabetes?

FACT 1

Gum disease, the silent assassin, is one of the two most common diseases that affects our oral cavity. It does not produce obvious signs and symptoms until it has progressed to an advanced stage.

FACT 2

Why do I bleed easily when brushing my teeth? Bacteria can attack our gums and cause injury, resulting in spontaneous bleeding or upon touching, pain, redness, and sometimes swelling. At this stage, a tell-tale sign may be bleeding gums after gentle brushing of teeth. Diabetes patients suffer worse as their existing conditions inhibit recovery from bleeding.

FACT 3

What has my tooth got to do with my health? It seems ridiculous that a small structure like the gums and teeth can affect the overall body. Research has shown that bacteria can either enter the bloodstream directly, or send chemicals into the bloodstream through injured gums. These harmful substances have been shown to increase insulin resistance, worsen the diabetic conditions, increase the risk of cardiovascular events, diabetes, pre-term low birth rate babies, etc.

FACT 4

Gum disease destroys bone and causes tooth loss. Left untreated, bacteria can spread deeper towards the bone and cause destruction of the bone. In the advanced stage of gum disease, the tooth has lost so much bone that it becomes shaky and may drift out of position. The tooth can no longer be kept and has to be extracted.

TAKING CARE OF OUR GUMS

Since gum disease is usually silent and does not trouble patients until the disease has progressed to an advanced stage, it is easy for patients to ignore their presence. In particular for diabetic patients, it is important to increase the awareness of the silent effects of gum disease on their health.

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