**Good Oral Health Can Prevent Jack o’ Lantern Smile – or Worse**

If fear of a jack o’ lantern smile isn’t enough to get you brushing and flossing, then maybe this will: According to the U.S. Surgeon General, “You cannot be healthy without oral health.”

Good oral health is essential to our everyday lives. It allows us to speak, smile, eat, and show our feelings through our facial expressions. Yet, oral diseases ranging from cavities to oral cancer cause pain and disability for millions of Americans every year.

Many studies have shown a link between oral health and overall health. So it just makes good sense to include brushing and flossing in our daily routines and to see a dentist regularly.

Regardless of how healthy our eating habits are, or how diligently we exercise, we may put ourselves at risk for serious disease if we don’t take proper care of our teeth and gums.

**Teeth for a Lifetime**

In 1900, most Americans expected to lose all their teeth by age 45 – and most did. Fortunately, we’ve seen major improvements in oral health since then. Now most people assume they’ll keep their teeth for a lifetime.

Dental sealants and water fluoridation have led to a big reduction in cavities among both children and adults. Yet, 1 in 4 U.S. adults has untreated cavities. Among children, cavities are the most common chronic health problem in our country today.

Cavities are the result of infection with certain types of bacteria that use sugars in food to make acids. Over time, these acids can make a hole in the tooth.

Untreated cavities can cause pain, trouble chewing food, school or work absences, difficulty concentrating, and poor appearance. These harm a person’s quality of life and ability to succeed.

To help prevent cavities:

- Brush your teeth at least twice a day with a toothpaste that contains fluoride. Try to brush after each meal and before going to bed.
- Clean between your teeth daily with dental floss or other cleaners meant for use between teeth.
- Rinse daily with a fluoride-containing mouthwash.
- Eat nutritious and balanced meals and limit snacks. Avoid sweets and carbohydrates like pretzels and chips, which can stick to the tooth surface. If you eat sticky foods, brush promptly.
- Check with your dentist about using supplemental fluoride, which strengthens your teeth.
- Ask your dentist about sealants. These protective coatings can be applied to the chewing surfaces of your back teeth to protect against decay.
- Drink fluoridated water.
- Visit your dentist regularly for professional cleanings and an oral exam.

Preventing Gum Disease

In the past two decades, an explosion of studies has shown connections between severe periodontal, or gum, disease and a scary list of other conditions, like heart disease, diabetes, and stroke.

Gum disease in women may even contribute to babies that are born too soon and too small. These babies have an increased risk of poor health throughout their lives.

While these studies have suggested an association between gum disease and chronic disease, the U.S. Surgeon General has reported that “sufficient evidence does not yet exist to conclude that one leads to the other.” More research is under way to look at these connections.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, almost half of all adults aged 30 or older have signs of gum disease. The most obvious are sore, red, and receding gums that bleed easily. Bad breath and tooth loss are also indications.

Those at the highest risk of gum disease are smokers, tobacco chewers, and people with diabetes, osteoporosis, or other systemic autoimmune diseases that compromise the body’s ability to fight infection. Heredity can also be a factor.

You can also “catch” periodontitis from someone else who has the disease. Bacteria in the mouth can be transmitted through saliva – for example, by using another person’s toothbrush.

To help prevent gum disease, the American Dental Association recommends following the preventive measures for cavities listed above, along with these additional steps:

- Replace your toothbrush every three or four months. (An easy way to remember is to do it on the first day of every season).
- Let your dentist know of any medications you take or chronic diseases you have.
- Don’t smoke or chew tobacco.

Good oral health seems like a small price to pay for potentially better overall health. And these days, that’s really something to smile about.

Finding Low-Cost Care

Research has shown that access to oral health care is associated with gender, age, education level, income, race, ethnicity, insurance status, and geographic location. Children from lower-income families are almost twice as likely to have cavities as kids from higher-income families, and they’re much less likely to have dental sealants.
If cost is keeping you from the dentist, PureView Health Center offers affordable, routine care on a sliding-fee scale through its dental clinic at 1930 Ninth Avenue. Adults and children can get regular exams, teeth cleaning, mouth X-rays, tooth extractions, fillings, and limited root canals. To make an appointment, call PureView at 457-8928.

For more information about good oral health, visit the American Dental Association’s Mouth Healthy website at www.mouthhealthy.org