

## GOOD ORAL HEALTH CAN SAVE YOUR LIFE

**Dear Dr McCrummen, I have heard that a person can get a brain or heart infection from teeth problems. Please explain that. I hate to have my teeth cleaned because it hurts and they bleed, so I don't. What can I do to not have pain, and keep expenses down since I don't have insurance? K.H.**

The mouth is a pathway to the stomach, but also to the brain and heart. An infection from a cavity or gum disease can spread to other parts of the body through the blood system. It does not usually make the newspapers when someone dies from a dental infection, but it occurs. Traffic fatalities often make the newspapers, which is the #1 cause of non-disease related death in Montana. A recent article stated that Montana was #1 in the nation for traffic related deaths per capita.

There are over 500 different types of germs in the mouth. They can invade the teeth and gums and cause no pain until the nerves are affected. Similar to most diseases, discomfort usually means the problems are advanced, and complex treatment may be needed. We do not feel high blood pressure, high levels of cholesterol, or hardening of the arteries, and we do not feel melanoma, prostate or breast cancer in the early, more treatable stages. Unlike many diseases, oral disease can usually be prevented quite simply.

Poor oral health can lead to pain, a dangerous abscess, infection in the lungs, jaw bones, brain, heart, and can seriously complicate diabetes. Dental disease can cause complications during pregnancy, affecting both the expectant mother and the child. Over 60,000 people die from pneumonia each year. In a recent nursing home study, 70% of the bacteria found in the lungs of people with pneumonia were from dental plaque. Dental germs can cause blood vessel inflammation and stress the body's immune system making it harder to heal and stay healthy. You and your dental health care providers can help prevent these problems.

Reduce your discomfort and expense by doing your homework, which takes only 5-6 minutes each day. Visit your dental office as often as is recommended for your health, having the necessary dental x-rays and fluoride treatment. You will pay much less for these routine services than the cost of yearly dental insurance premiums, paying the deductible, and paying the portion of treatment not covered.

Pain and bleeding during the cleanings is due to bacterial invasion and inflammation, so please don't blame the hygienist. With good oral health, cleanings are usually painless, and many say it feels good. To reduce anticipated discomfort it can be helpful to take two ibuprofen one hour before the dental visit, if you are not sensitive to it or have never been advised not to take it. A Tylenol type medication is an alternative if that can be taken. If your gums are too sensitive for the hygienist to clean thoroughly ask for a simple rinse that is available in some offices, or a pre-numbing gel can be used. In cases of deep disease a simple injection of a little anesthetic can allow the hygienist help you the most.

The goal should be to prevent problems. Avoiding the dentist due to fear of pain and expense will lead to the reality of your fears as disease progresses and treatment becomes complex. Follow your dental health care provider's advice and you will likely have fewer problems and less discomfort. Dental care is not what is expensive. Neglect is really what costs so much. Treat your body well and give it the gift of good health whenever you can.