

## Oral health mirrors overall health

### **The importance of oral health**

Oral health means more than just an attractive smile. Poor oral health and untreated oral diseases and conditions can have a significant impact on quality of life. And in many cases, the condition of the mouth mirrors the condition of the body as a whole. Recent reports indicate a relationship between periodontal (gum) disease and stroke, heart disease, and pre-term low-birth-weight babies. Likewise, more than 90 percent of all systemic diseases have oral manifestations, meaning your dentist may be the first health care provider to diagnose a health problem.

### **What problems can poor oral health cause?**

According to the recently released Surgeon General's report on oral health in America, a large percentage of the population suffers from a

reduced quality of life due to oral and facial pain. This pain is largely due to infections of the gums that support the teeth and can lead to tooth loss. More than 75 percent of the population is affected by some type of periodontal disease or gingivitis.

Recent reports show that infections in the mouth can affect major organs. One example is bacterial endocarditis, a condition in which the lining of the heart and heart valves become inflamed. Poor mouth care also can contribute to oral cancer, which now takes more lives annually than cervical or skin cancer.

In addition, poor oral health affects the digestive process, which begins with physical and chemical activities in the mouth. Problems here can lead to intestinal failure, Irritable Bowel Syndrome and other problems.

### **What symptoms from other diseases show up in the mouth?**

Mouth tissues reflect symptoms of other problems. In addition, many diseases can be diagnosed in their early stages through an oral examination. These diseases may be characterized by swollen gums, mouth ulcers, dry mouth and/or excessive gum problems. Some of these diseases include diabetes, leukemia, cancer, heart disease and kidney disease.

### **What can I do?**

Seeing a dentist every six months can help identify diseases in their earliest stages. It also is important to provide your dentist with a complete medical/dental history and to inform him or her of any recent problems, even if they seem unrelated to your mouth.

### **What can my dentist do?**

A regular exam allows your

dentist to keep your mouth in tip-top shape and watch for developments that may point to problems elsewhere in your body. A dental exam also picks up on poor nutrition and hygiene, growth and development problems and improper jaw alignment. According to a recent survey, 90 percent of dentists said they counsel patients on home care for special oral health care needs resulting from chemotherapy or head and neck radiation therapy. Eighty-seven percent of dentists surveyed responded that they counsel patients on tobacco use, more than half provide direct counseling to patients. Thirty-eight percent of respondents also provide literature on the dangers of tobacco and information on tobacco cessation programs to patients, 17 percent refer patients to their primary care physician, and 14 percent directly refer patients to cessation services.