

Way to Prevent Heart Attacks

If you want to take care of your heart, go brush your teeth. Poor dental hygiene increases the risk of both heart attack and stroke, according to researchers from the University of Bristol in Great Britain. While smoking, obesity and high cholesterol are still the leading causes of a heart attack, neglected gums can now be added to that list.

Agence France Presse reports there are up to 700 different types of bacteria in the human mouth, and when you don't brush your teeth regularly, those bacteria flourish. "We now recognize that bacterial infections are an independent risk factor for heart diseases," professor Howard Jenkins explained to a meeting of the Society for General Microbiology in Dublin, Ireland. "In other words, it doesn't matter how fit, slim or healthy you are, you're adding to your chances of getting heart disease by having bad teeth."

While most of those mouth bacteria are benign and some are even essential to your good health, a few can create havoc, leading to diseases of the arteries that are associated with heart disease and strokes. "The mouth is probably the dirtiest place in the human body," Steve Kerrigan of the Royal College of Surgeons in Dublin told the conference. "If you have an open blood vessel from bleeding gums, bacteria will gain entry to your bloodstream."

Once bacteria enter the blood, they can stick onto cells known as platelets, which can cause them to clot inside the blood vessel. That decreases blood flow to the heart. "We mimicked the pressure inside the blood vessels and in the heart and demonstrated that bacteria use different mechanisms to cause platelets to clump together, allowing them to completely encase the bacteria," Kerrigan said. And it's a double whammy: Not only does this encasement create conditions that can cause a heart attack, but also it shields the bacteria from immune system cells and antibiotics.

Way to Prevent Heart Attacks 070409