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Wang, Audrey

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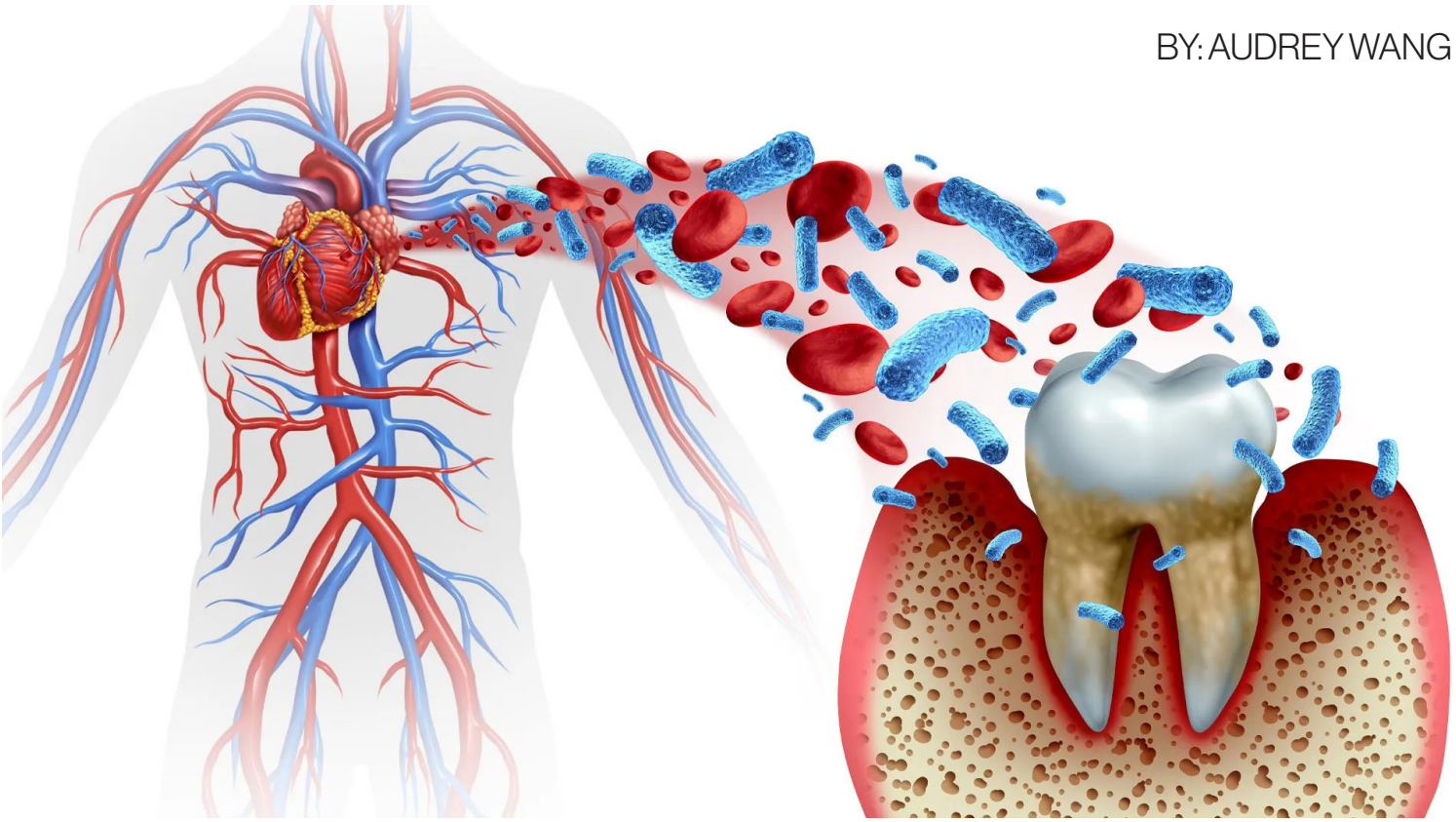
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HIDDEN IMPACTS GUM DISEASE HAS ON OVERALL HEALTH

BY: AUDREY WANG



INTRODUCTION

It's easy to overlook bleeding gums when brushing. For many people, it seems like a minor issue that could be resolved by using a softer toothbrush or flossing more frequently. But what appears to be a small inconvenience could actually be the beginning of a much more significant biological consequence: chronic inflammation. Periodontal disease, also known as gum disease, is a chronic inflammatory condition of the gums that's also related to systemic diseases such as cardiovascular diseases and diabetes. In fact, nearly 40% of adults aged 30 and older are affected by periodontal disease.[1, 2] The mouth is not an isolated system but instead a critical part of the body with connectivity to the bloodstream. The entrance of oral bacteria such as Porphyromonas gingivalis, Fusobacterium nucleatum, Aggregatibacter actinomycetemcomitans, and many others into circulation can cause systemic inflammation and, in turn, affect overall health. These microorganisms do not just stay in the gums; they can travel through the blood to vital organs, where they contribute to the formation of arterial plaques, interfere with insulin signaling, and even cross the blood-brain barrier.[3, 4] Thus, untreated gum disease could create a persistent inflammatory load in the body potentially shortening a person's lifespan by several years.

HOW DOES GUM DISEASE BEGIN?

Gum disease begins when plaque builds up along the gumline. Plaque is a sticky biofilm made of bacteria, food particles, and saliva that forms on the tooth surface.[5] Shortly after the teeth are cleaned, a thin protein layer consisting of several different amino acids and proteins (pellicle) forms on the tooth surface, protecting the teeth from acid attacks and helping with remineralization.[6] However, the pellicle is easy for bacteria to attach to, making it a great foundation for plaque formation over time.[7] Plaque develops as bacteria begin to interact and form structured communities on the pellicle. The body treats these bacteria along the gumline as foreign invaders and responds by triggering inflammation in the surrounding gum tissues.

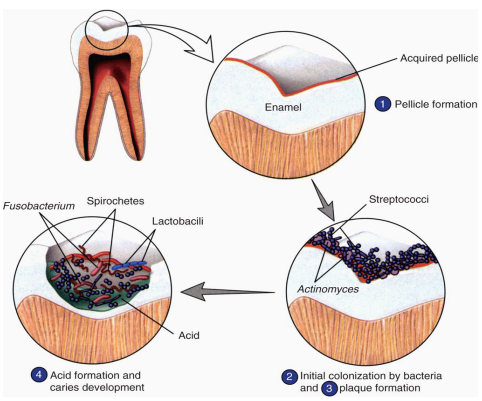


Figure 1. Formation of the dental pellicle. The pellicle is formed by salivary amino acids and proteins that rapidly accumulate on the tooth surface after cleaning. Streptococci (cavity-causing bacteria) adhere easily to the pellicle, making the tooth more prone to developing cavities.

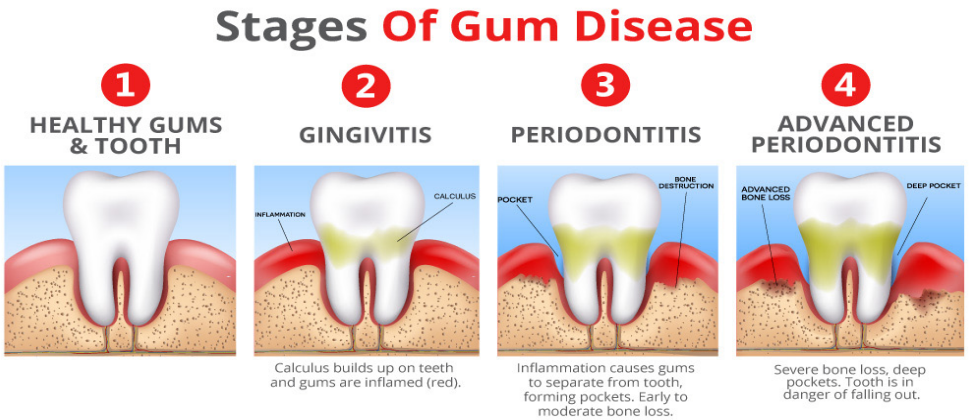


Figure 2. Healthy gums and teeth compared to gingivitis. Healthy gums appear non-inflamed, while gums with inflammation (caused by accumulation of calculus) are more red and swollen. As inflammation increases, formation of pockets causes the tooth to separate from the gum. The tooth will be in danger of falling out if untreated.

WHAT IS GUM DISEASE?

Gum disease is an inflammatory condition that affects the structural supports of the teeth, including the gingiva, alveolar bone, periodontal ligament, and cementum. The gingiva, commonly known as the gums, is the firm tissue that supports the base of the teeth and covers the underlying alveolar bone, which connects to the jaw and supports tooth roots. The periodontal ligament is a connective tissue that anchors the tooth roots to the alveolar bone socket, while cementum (a calcified tissue) acts as the attachment point.

Gum disease typically progresses through two stages: gingivitis and periodontitis. Gingivitis is the earliest and most reversible stage, caused by plaque accumulation along the gumline. Common symptoms include bad breath, bleeding gums, and swelling.[4] Gingivitis can be reversed by removing plaque buildup and allowing the gums to recover. However, if inflammation worsens due to a lack of treatment, it progresses to periodontitis, a more severe stage in which gum tissues are destroyed, leading to gum recession, pocket formation, and potential tooth loss. The suffix "-itis" stands for inflammation, indicating that both gingivitis and periodontitis are inflammatory conditions.[8]

HOW ORAL BACTERIA ENTER THE BODY

The effects of gum disease are not confined to the mouth. Inflammation can cause gums to bleed during daily activities such as brushing or flossing, allowing bacteria to enter the bloodstream.[4, 9] Inflammation also weakens the protective epithelial barrier of the tooth-supporting tissues in a process called ulceration (the breakdown of the epithelial barrier), exposing the underlying connective tissue (lamina propria).[10, 11] As a result, oral bacteria can enter the bloodstream through micro-injuries in a process called bacteremia. Once in circulation, these microorganisms can travel throughout the body, interact with different vital tissues, particularly the heart, the vascular endothelium, and the liver, and trigger systemic inflammation through immune activation.[12]

EFFECTS ON CARDIOVASCULAR HEALTH

Gum disease can negatively affect cardiovascular health by promoting damage and causing dysfunction of blood vessels. Bacteria from the mouth can adhere to blood vessel walls, in turn contributing to the formation of arterial plaque. Over time, this accumulation of plaque increases the risk of blood clots, heart attacks, and strokes.[13]

A main cause of these effects is bacteria and their toxic byproducts, such as lipopolysaccharides (the outer membrane of some bacteria such as Gram negative bacteria) circulating in the bloodstream. Lipopolysaccharides trigger immune responses, which leads to significant inflammation.[14] Together, they can cause arterial walls to harden and plaque to build up in a process called atherosclerosis. This early stage of cardiovascular disease involves endothelial dysfunction, an arterial disease that narrows arteries and restricts blood flow. The endothelium normally maintains smooth blood flow by producing nitric oxide (NO), a signaling molecule that helps blood vessels relax and expand.[15]

However, the immune response to these bacteria can cause widespread inflammation, promoting further plaque development and disrupting blood flow.13 When endothelial cells are damaged or chronically inflamed, their ability to produce NO is reduced. Since NO helps prevent clot formation and limits immune cell attachment to vessel walls, its reduction increases cardiovascular risk.[16]

Over time, fatty plaque within arteries can rupture. When this occurs, blood clots form rapidly at the rupture site, potentially causing a heart attack. If this same blockage and rupture process occurs in brain tissue, then blood flow to the brain might be blocked, leading to a stroke.

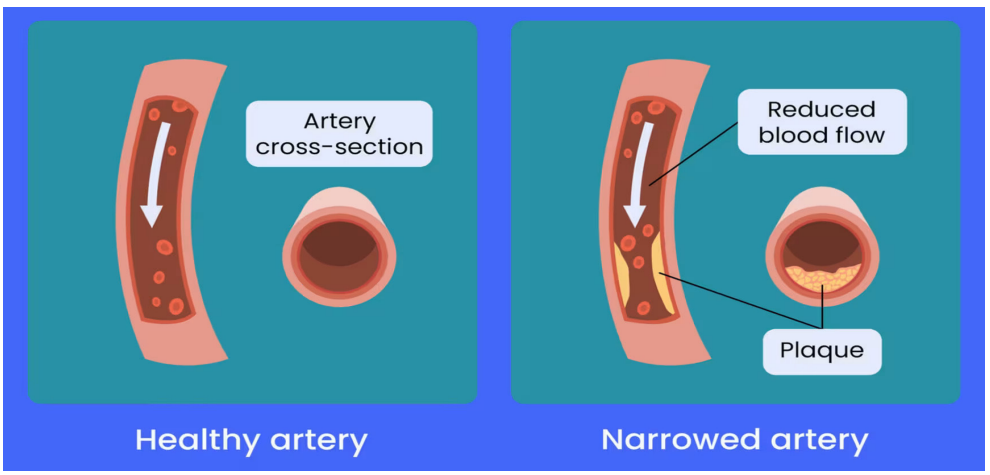


Figure 3. Atherosclerosis. Inflammation and circulating bacteria contribute to plaque buildup on the arterial walls, narrowing blood vessels and reducing blood flow.

It's easy to overlook bleeding gums when brushing... but what appears to be a small inconvenience could actually be the beginning of a much more significant biological consequence.

EFFECTS ON DIABETES

Diabetes and gum disease have a bidirectional relationship, meaning each condition can worsen the other. This creates a feedback loop in which inflammation and metabolic dysfunction reinforce each other.

For reference, insulin is a hormone that allows glucose from the bloodstream to enter cells for energy storage. Under typical conditions, insulin binds to its receptor (IRS-1), allowing cells to take in glucose. However, inflammation increases the production of inflammatory mediators, including TNF-α, which alters IRS-1 activation, leading to insulin resistance and increased blood sugar levels.[8, 17] As a result, cells become less responsive to insulin, leading to insulin resistance.

At the same time, infected periodontal tissues further contribute to insulin resistance by releasing inflammatory molecules, such as cytokines, into the bloodstream.[18] These molecules interfere with insulin signaling pathways, further reducing cellular responsiveness to insulin.[19] As a result, glucose remains in the bloodstream for a longer time, contributing to persistently high blood sugar levels (hyperglycemia).

Additionally, cytokine release from the periodontal tissues (coupled with obesity and a high-fat diet) can activate the nuclear factor-kappa B (NF-κB) pathway. This promotes the expression of genes associated with inflammation and insulin resistance, yielding a similar effect as described above.[20] Importantly, this mechanism works in both directions. Individuals with diabetes are more susceptible to gum disease due to generally having a weaker immune system and slower wound healing, which allows periodontitis to worsen over time.[21]

CONCLUSION

Gum disease is often overlooked as a minor oral health issue, but its effects extend far beyond the mouth. Through chronic inflammation and the spread of bacteria, it can influence critical systems in the body and contribute to systemic conditions such as cardiovascular disease and diabetes. While periodontal disease is not the sole cause, it still plays a role in increasing the risk. Factors such as diet, lifestyle, and genetics may play a greater role in preserving overall health. Simple habits such as brushing twice a day, flossing daily, and regular dental check-ups bring benefits beyond preserving a beautiful smile, such as helping maintain overall health.

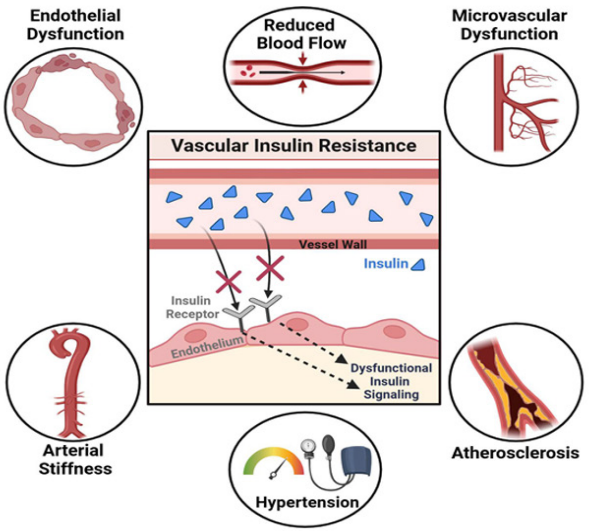


Figure 4. Anatomy of insulin resistance. Inflammatory signaling disrupts insulin receptor pathways, reducing cellular glucose intake and contributing to hyperglycemia.

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IMAGE REFERENCES

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