**Landmark Study Discovers and Makes Recommendations About**

**a New, Treatable, Oral Cause of Heart Disease, Heart Attack, and Stroke**

A common dental disorder found in millions of Americans can lead to heart attacks and strokes, according to a recent peer-reviewed study published in the *British Medical Journal* (BMJ) Nov. 29, 2016.

The study is the first to identify periodontal disease (PD…also called *periodontitis* or *gum disease*) due to certain high-risk oral bacteria as a contributing **cause** of cardiovascular disease (CVD), the leading killer of men and women globally. It showed that poor oral health is not jut a “risk factor” for heart problems and early death, but actually a direct cause.

The research, published by Drs. Bale, Doneen, and Vigerust was based on Level A scientific evidence and has potentially life saving implications by suggesting a new strategy to help prevent heart attacks and strokes.

It has long been known that poor oral hygiene leads to all kinds of tooth and gum problems, but this study clearly demonstrated that these problems can often lead to other serious health conditions, like heart attack and stroke, as well as a significantly shorter lifespan. It proved once and for all that the mouth and the body are not somehow separate…they are intricately linked and significantly affect each other. Bottom line: poor oral health can lead to premature death!

Here is a closer look at the study and key takeaways you can use to optimize your oral and cardiovascular (heart and blood vessel) health.

**Why is this Study Groundbreaking and Why Should YOU Care About it?**

Hundreds of earlier research studies, including a scientific statement by the American Heart Association, have shown a strong, independent association between PD—which affects the majority of U.S. adults over age 30 and up to 80% of Baby Boomers and Seniors—and cardiovascular events. In fact, a 2016 meta-analysis that pooled studies of more than 7,000 people found that those with periodontitis were more than twice as likely to suffer fatal heart attacks compared to people with healthy gums! And, they had their deadly heart attacks at a much younger age.

There is a key difference between a condition (like gum disease) being *associated* with another disease (like heart disease) versus being the actual *cause*. We’ve long known these two conditions to be related, but now we know that untreated gum disease actually causes heart disease directly. It’s not just a risk factor.

This knowledge has a profound impact on how aggressively and quickly we now treat PD. Until recently, we weren’t sure whether treating an *associated* condition had much of an impact on your risk of developing the end disease. But, this study definitively proved that treating gum disease improves cardiac health and reduces heart attack risk, since there is a strong cause-effect relationship between the two.

It follows that dental treatment for your *causal* condition of PD can not only potentially save your teeth for a lifetime, it can also have a beneficial effect regarding your heart health. In fact, it can be potentially lifesaving by helping to prevent an often fatal heart attack and stroke.

**What Are the Warning Signs of PD and How is it Best Treated?**

PD has no symptoms and is completely pain-free in the early stages. It’s easy for your dentist to diagnose, but can be very difficult for you to detect. As a result, millions of people don’t even realize they have a serious oral infection that can lead to rampant tooth loss if untreated. In fact, over 80% of all teeth lost in the U.S. are due to untreated gum disease. And, as we now know, this common dental condition has been shown to directly cause heart disease.

Oral warning signs your dentist will look for include red, swollen, or tender gums which bleed easily, receding gums, loose or sensitive teeth, teeth which have shifted, changes on your X-ray images, “pockets” where your gums meet your teeth, and persistent bad breath. Notice that “pain” is absent from this list. This is why I often refer to PD as the “silent killer” of teeth…and maybe of you, too.

If you already have heart disease, you should be checked for the high-risk oral bacteria discussed in the BMJ study. For this, your dentist will use the recommended *OralDNA* saliva test. This simple test has been shown to be very valuable and helpful in reducing heart disease and your risk of heart attack and stroke, even if you don’t have any obvious signs of PD. One of the amazing new insights offered by this study is that some common oral bacteria can cause heart damage even without full-blown PD.

We do not yet have a cure for PD, and there is currently no single treatment proven to be 100% effective in eradicating your high-risk oral bacteria. However, we can almost always significantly reduce the oral infection and maintain that lower level for a lifetime.

Today’s treatments for PD are more predictable and more comfortable than ever. They include deep cleanings, a daily program of oral care to follow at home, prescription mouthwashes, dental trays with antibacterial gel, dental lasers, and oral antibiotics.

Regardless of which treatments are prescribed, the “Bale Doneen Method” published in this (and many other) studies recommends repeating the *OralDNA* test afterwards to see how well your body responded and how well the treatment worked. A follow-up *OralDNA* study can help to monitor progress and also guide further treatment decisions.

**What are the Best Ways for You to Avoid PD…and Also Lower Your Heart Attack Risk?**

If you smoke, here’s yet another reason to kick the habit: it’s a leading risk factor for developing gum disease. Poorly controlled diabetes is also a big predictor of PD. Dry mouth (a common condition in Baby Boomers and Seniors) is also a major risk factor. And, obviously, poor oral hygiene and irregular dental visits top the list of risk factors for poor oral health and bad breath.

**We Advise These Easy Measures to Promote Your Oral Wellness and Heart Health:**

☺ Brush and floss (at least) twice a day for (at least) two minutes. If you aren’t sure how to brush and floss correctly, just ask your dental hygienist for a quick explanation and demonstration.

☺ You may have seen recent headlines claiming there’s not much science to support flossing. These stories were incomplete and often taken out of context. Consider this: in a nine-year study of 5,611 older adults, people who never flossed had a 30% higher death rate than those who flossed daily! Their teeth, gums, and breath were obviously worse, too. It only make sense that cleaning each tooth entirely (not just the half you can reach with a toothbrush) is important.

☺ Go to bed with a clean mouth. This study found that not brushing at night raised mortality risk by 25%, compared to nightly brushing. Since your mouth produces less saliva to wash your teeth/gums and dilute acids when you’re sleeping, it’s particularly crucial to floss and brush thoroughly before bed. Bacteria also multiply much faster and produce a lot more harmful acid in a dry environment at night. Use a high-quality sonic toothbrush for best results.

☺ Get a dental cleaning every three months. Science has repeatedly shown that oral bacteria and dental plaque are most aggressive starting at 90 days, so get your teeth cleaned more often than the customary “twice a year.” Especially as you get older, you should see your dental team more often. Follow the science and you’ll stay healthier.

☺ This study also found that people who hadn’t gone to a dentist in the previous year had a 50% higher mortality rate than those who went two or more times annually, prompting the researchers to conclude that good oral health promotes longevity by helping people avoid deadly systemic diseases sparked by infections and chronic inflammation, such as heart disease, heart attack, and stroke.

☺ Share this BMJ study with your friends and family (and maybe with another dentist or hygienist). Because this science is so new, not everyone is aware of it yet. You can be someone else’s hero, too!

**THESE (AND MANY MORE) ARE THE**

**REASONS WHY WE WORK SO HARD**

**TO PREVENT PERIODONTITIS.**

**IT’S ALSO WHY WE CHECK AND TREAT**

**YOUR GUM DISEASE SO OFTEN**

**AND SO ASSERTIVELY**

**IF YOU ALREADY HAVE IT…**

**TO HELP YOU KEEP YOUR TEETH**

**FOR A LIFETIME, TO KEEP YOUR HEART**

**AND CORONARY ARTIERIES HEALTHIER,**

**AND PROBABLY EVEN TO EXTEND YOUR LIFE!**

***Based on: Bale BF, Doneen AL, Vigerust DJ. BMJ/ Postgrad Med J. Published first online: November 29, 2016. doi:10.1136/postgradmedj-2016-134279***