

BAD BREATH: MORE THAN JUST A FOUL SMELL? RESEARCH AFFIRMS THE NEED FOR REGULAR DENTAL CARE

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Bad breath: it's a delicate subject. Few people readily volunteer to tell someone that their breath smells bad. An offer of a piece of gum or a mint can be a tactful way to approach the problem. However, for more than 50 million people, breath odor won't be easily solved with chewing gum or mints. Their bad breath may actually be a symptom of periodontal disease.

According to the American Academy of Periodontology, periodontal disease, or gum disease, is caused by bacteria that progressively attacks the gums and hidden roots of teeth. It begins with bacteria in the mouth forming a sticky plaque, which hardens into tartar on the teeth. When the tartar forms under the gum line, it can irritate and infect the gums. If it's not regularly removed, this serious oral condition destroys the soft tissue and bone that supports teeth, making it a major cause of bone loss.

While periodontal disease has often been characterized as a disease that only affects "older people," recent dental and medical research has shown that it can attack the gums of younger individuals. Currently it's estimated that periodontal disease affects more than one in three people over age 30.

Although periodontal disease has a significant impact on oral health, dental and medical professionals believe it is a risk factor for other serious health concerns, such as cardiovascular disease, diabetes, rheumatoid arthritis, chronic kidney disease, and even some forms of cancer.

New Communications Opportunities for Producers

According to the National Institute of Dental and Craniofacial Research, Americans spend \$8 to \$12 billion each year just for periodontal care, not to mention medical expenses incurred for other health concerns.

Producers have a unique opportunity to communicate the value of dental insurance to employers in helping to respond to the growing concern about the impact of periodontal disease on employees, and the related effect on productivity, performance and associated higher medical costs.

Consider the following ways periodontal disease affects the health of employees:

Women's Oral Health Issues. According to the Journal of Periodontology, periodontal disease may be a health risk for women due to their hormonal fluctuations at various stages of life.

During puberty, the rise in hormone levels can lead to swollen and sensitive gums and mouth sores. Women taking oral contraceptives may experience gingivitis and dry socket, whereas women who are pregnant are at risk to develop inflamed gums which can result in gum disease. Studies show that pregnant women diagnosed with gum disease are more likely to have preterm, low-birth-weight babies. During menopause, women commonly develop dry mouth and sore and sensitive gums.

The American Academy of Periodontology advises that women should take extra steps to maintain good oral health during the different transitional stages of their lives so they can avoid issues with periodontal disease.

Periodontal Concerns for Men. According to the Academy of General Dentistry, men are less likely to regularly brush their teeth or seek preventive dental care. They often ignore their oral health for years, scheduling a dental visit only when problems arise, which makes them a more likely candidate for periodontal disease. Men need to pay close attention to changes in their oral health, such as persistent bad breath, loose teeth, or red, swollen, sore or bleeding gums, and promptly seek assistance from a dental professional.

Older Workers Face Coronary Issues. Researchers with the American Academy of Periodontology have determined that individuals with periodontal disease are at increased risk for coronary heart disease, with twice the risk of having a fatal heart attack.

There are more than 700 different types of bacteria found in the mouth. When bacteria travels from bleeding gums into an open blood vessel, they cling to platelets inside the blood and may eventually cause a partial blockage in the blood flowing to the heart and result in a heart attack. Approximately 85 percent of heart attack patients have periodontal disease.

Other Major Health Care Concerns

Cancer. The National Cancer Institute (NCI) reports that pancreatic cancer is the fourth leading cause of cancer-related deaths in the United States, with more than 30,000 Americans succumbing to it each year. Less than five percent of individuals diagnosed with pancreatic cancer survive more than five years. Pancreatic cancer is extremely difficult to treat and little is known about exact causes. However, NCI researchers found that individuals with periodontal disease have higher levels of oral bacteria, which may contribute to the development of pancreatic cancer. The studies also report that men with periodontal disease have an increased risk for getting this type of cancer.

Rheumatoid Arthritis. More than 1.3 million Americans suffer from rheumatoid arthritis, which is a chronic inflammatory disease of the joints. This disabling condition often leads to long-term joint damage, and is accompanied by pain and loss of function in affected areas. Researchers with the American Academy of Periodontology have discovered that individuals with rheumatoid arthritis are eight times more likely to have a higher incidence of periodontal disease.

Type 2 Diabetes. Medical researchers at Columbia University Mailman School of Public Health discovered that individuals diagnosed with periodontal disease are twice as likely to become diabetic within the following 20 years. It's believed that periodontal disease alters the metabolic condition of individuals, contributing to the progression of Type 2 diabetes.

Gum infections allow bacteria to enter the bloodstream, affecting the body's ability to remove glucose, which is sugar, from the blood. This creates more difficulty for individuals in controlling their diabetes,

and may eventually lead to increased vision problems, cardiovascular and kidney disease, and circulation issues that could result in amputation.

Periodontal Treatments Control the Problems

Although periodontal disease is a serious health concern, the good news is that it is preventable. In addition to regular dental checkups for cleaning and oral health evaluations, individuals should always brush after meals, floss daily, and use an antiseptic mouth-wash to maintain good oral health and keep the rest of the body healthy. For some individuals, periodontal disease is serious enough to require some type of advanced treatment, such as surgery.

The Need for Dental Insurance

According to the U.S. Department of Labor's Bureau of Labor Statistics, dental insurance can influence employees' use of dental care options. Approximately 80 percent of workers will participate in benefit programs if dental care is included in their benefits package. However, nationwide, only 46 percent of employees have access to dental care through their employers' benefit programs.

The National Association of Dental Plans reinforces the importance of dental benefits in a new report – “The State of the Dental Benefits Market, 2007” – which identifies that employees want quality dental plans with extensive services instead of plans with limited coverage features, even if the benefits are offered as voluntary options. They also want immediate access to dental benefits and do not want to wait to meet plan use restrictions. NADP reports that given a choice between a high-benefit voluntary option and a low-benefit one, employees are more likely to choose the higher-benefit plan option.

The Importance of Communication and Education

Producers have an excellent opportunity to communicate with employers the health risks related to periodontal disease, and the importance of dental benefits for employees to help prevent or treat this serious oral health concern. Dental carriers offer different benefit plan options, requiring producers to carefully evaluate plan designs to find the right choices for their clients. As you evaluate the dental needs of employer groups, you may find it easier to work with experienced insurance carriers who can design customized plan solutions that will serve the needs of both employers and employees.

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