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Brush up on your dental care

Oral Report

STORY BY R. J. IGNELZI



LA JOLLA PERIODONTIST,
DR. PETER NORDLAND

*Your gums are under constant attack by bacteria;
a good defense can save more than just your smile*

Just because you brush twice a day and stay away from candy and sugary drinks, you're not necessarily home free from oral problems. Despite your good efforts, periodontal disease could still be lurking in the dark crevices of your teeth and gums.

An estimated 80 percent of American adults have some form of periodontal disease, according to the National Institute of Dental and Craniofacial Research at the National Institutes of Health.

Many people go untreated for periodontal disease because it usually doesn't hurt. By the time they feel or notice any problems with their gums, it's too late and the bones and tissues of the mouth are at risk.

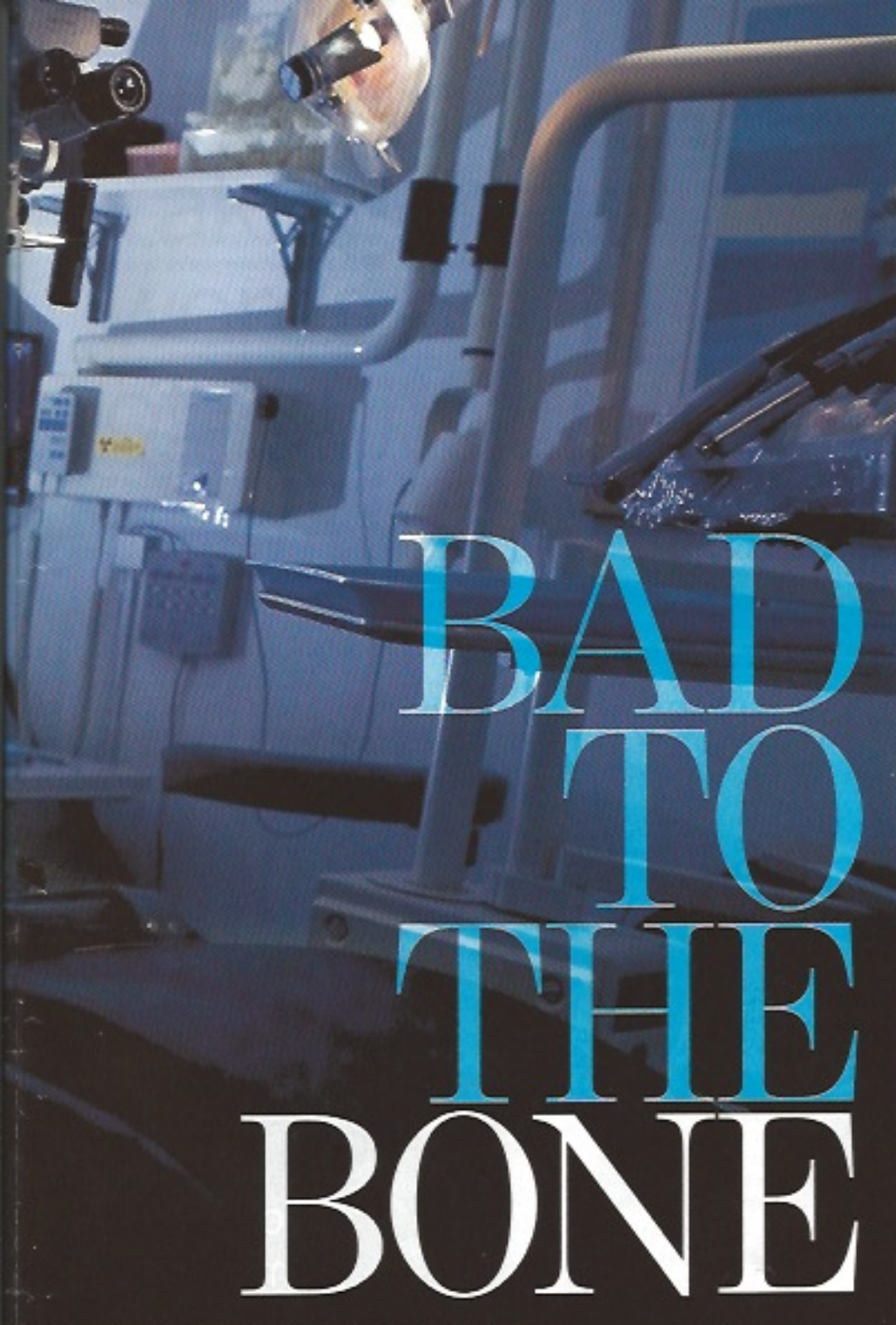
"With periodontal disease, there's no obvious pain as you'd experience if you needed a root canal," says Dr. Peter Nordland, a La Jolla periodontist. "This is a chronic inflammatory process that is slow growing. Many times people can have advanced periodontal disease and be totally unaware of it."

The main cause of gum disease is bacteria, which is found in plaque, a sticky, color-

less film that constantly forms on the teeth and tongue.

Daily brushing, flossing, tongue scraping and other forms of interdental cleaning usually remove plaque to keep the gums healthy. However, it doesn't take long for haphazard brushing and flossing to lead to gingivitis, the early stage of periodontal disease. Characterized by swollen and bleeding gums, it's reversible with professional treatment and diligent home oral care.

But if left untreated, gingivitis can develop into periodontitis, advanced gum disease. As tartar and plaque continue to build



BAD TO THE BONE

MELVIN C. CEPEDA

TISSUE ISSUES

Periodontal disease is often silent, with symptoms sometimes not appearing until the disease is in an advanced stage. However, it's always wise to be on the lookout for signs of gum disease. According to the American Academy of Periodontology, these can include:

- Red, swollen or tender gums
- Bleeding while brushing or flossing
- Gums that pull away from the teeth
- Loose or separating teeth
- Pus between the gum and the tooth
- Persistent bad breath
- A change in the way your teeth fit together when you bite
- A change in the fit of partial dentures

— R. J. IGNELZI

can increase the risk of getting pancreatic cancer and may predispose some people to developing early signs of diabetes.

To save your teeth and your general health, stopping periodontal disease before it starts is critical, say periodontists.

It's never too late to start taking care of your teeth and gums, say the American Academy of Periodontology (AAP) and San Diego periodontists. They list some factors that may increase your risk of developing periodontal disease along with tips to help counter each one.

Poor oral hygiene

Dental experts recommend brushing at least twice and flossing at least once a day. You need to have your teeth professionally checked and cleaned at least every six months. If you have periodontal disease, you should have your teeth cleaned every three months.

"The best time to brush is after breakfast and before bed. And if you floss just once a day, the best time to do it is at night, before bed," says Dr. Gary Sigafoos, a La Jolla periodontist.

Smoking

Smokers are two to seven times more likely to develop periodontitis than non-smokers because tobacco can weaken the immune response and decrease the amount of oxygen in the mouth, according to the AAP.

Smokers need to trade in their nasty habit for good oral care habits.

Genetics

As many as 30 percent of the population is genetically susceptible to gum disease, the AAP says. If your parents have had gum disease, you are six times more likely to develop it, even with aggressive oral hygiene. Tell

up, pockets form between the teeth and gums, and the gums may begin to recede. As the pockets become deeper, the disease destroys more gum tissue and progresses to the bone, which can eventually cause teeth to become loose or fall out.

A dentist, periodontist or dental hygienist can remove plaque through deep cleanings called scaling and root planing. If inflammation and deep pockets remain after cleaning and medication, it may be necessary to do flap surgery, which involves lifting back the gums and removing the tartar. Your periodontist may also suggest bone and tissue

grafts to help replace or encourage new growth of bone or gum tissue destroyed by the disease.

Proper oral hygiene not only helps protect your teeth and gums but may also prevent serious illness and disease. Recent research has shown that when periodontal bacteria travel from the mouth through the bloodstream, they may lodge in the blood vessel walls, triggering inflammation and causing the walls to thicken. A thickened blood vessel wall can increase a person's risk of heart disease and heart attack.

Other studies indicate that gum disease

your dentist and your hygienist, who may recommend more frequent cleanings and special mouth rinses to reduce the plaque.

Diabetes

Diabetics tend to have more severe gum disease and get it earlier than nondiabetics.

Gum infections can impair a diabetic's ability to process or use insulin, which may cause the diabetes to be more difficult to control and the periodontal infection to be more severe, Sigafos says. If you're diabetic, tell your dentist and hygienist about your condition and be vigilant about oral care and blood sugar management.

Hormonal changes

When there's a flux in hormones during puberty, pregnancy and menopause, there can also be a change in the body's tissues, including the gums, making them more susceptible to gum disease.

"With hormone change, the tissues overreact to plaque and can cause more gingivitis, more puffiness and bleeding of the

gums," says Sigafos, who notes the problem can be controlled with good home oral care and frequent professional cleanings.

Stress

Tension, anxiety and general stress can make it more difficult for the body to fight off infection, including periodontal disease.

"When someone is stressed, they often aren't sleeping and they have a poor diet and that's when the tissues are more sensitive to plaque and there's often more bleeding of the gums," Sigafos says.

Bruxism

"Grinding or clenching the teeth softens the bone around the neck of the tooth, and it's easier for gum infection to spread and the bone and ligaments to be injured," Sigafos says.

If you know you grind your teeth, talk to your dentist about getting a mouth guard to wear while you sleep.

Medications

Some commonly used drugs, including antihistamines, heart and blood-pressure

medicine and antidepressants, can affect your oral health by drying out the mouth.

"There are antibodies in the saliva that can help fight bacteria. When the saliva flow is reduced, the resistance is reduced," Nordland says.

Be sure to inform your dentist or periodontist about all medications you're taking.

Poor nutrition

A diet that lacks proper nutrients can compromise the body's immune system and make it more difficult to fend off infections, including periodontal disease.

Kissing or sharing eating utensils

The bacteria that causes periodontal disease can pass through saliva, according to the AAP. The common contact of saliva in families puts children and couples at risk for contracting the gum disease of another family member.

"Gum disease is communicable if the person you're giving it to has deep enough pockets (between the teeth and gums) to harbor bacteria," Sigafos says. □

Mouth awash

People have such dirty mouths. Well, maybe crowded is a better word. Roughly 600 species are believed to reside in the human mouth: bacteria, viruses, fungi, archaea (a group of microbes best known for thriving in extreme conditions).

Indeed, there are an estimated 100 million assorted bacteria in just a single milliliter (about one-fifth of a teaspoon) of saliva. English researchers announced last year that they had discovered a brand new species.

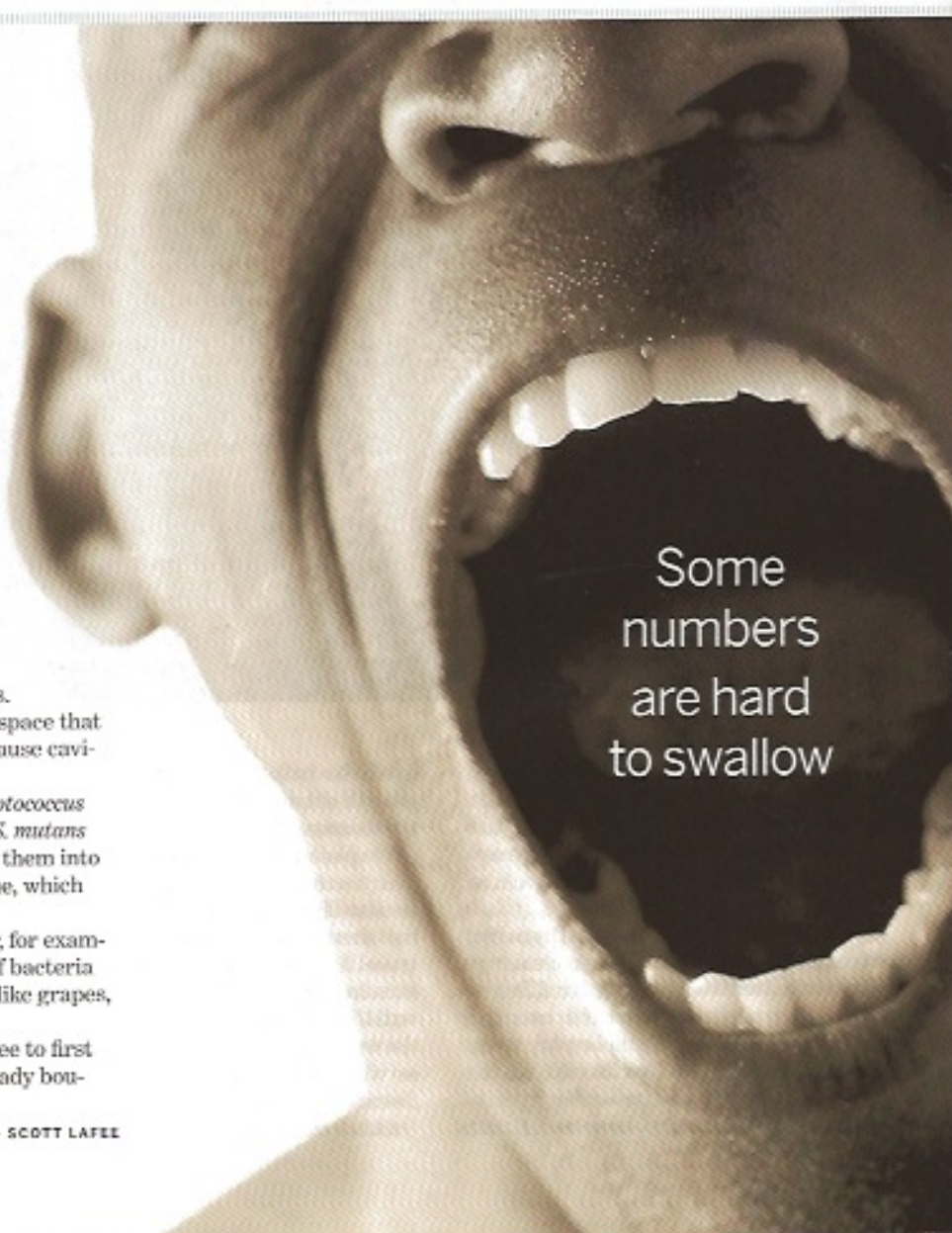
Most of these invisible inhabitants are harmless. Some, in fact, are beneficial because they take up space that might otherwise be occupied by nasty bugs that cause cavities, bleeding gums and bad breath.

Perhaps the most notorious of the latter is *Streptococcus mutans*, a bacterium responsible for tooth decay. *S. mutans* feeds upon sugars found in the mouth, converting them into lactic acid that eats away enamel and sticky plaque, which helps the bacteria resist brushing and rinsing.

Other microbes actually do good. Late last year, for example, Swiss scientists reported that certain kinds of bacteria in the mouth convert odorless chemicals in foods like grapes, onions and peppers into smells that boost flavor.

So next time you sip a glass of pinot noir, feel free to first toast a bacterium for its role in producing that heady bouquet and sassy taste.

— SCOTT LAFEE



Some
numbers
are hard
to swallow