



Smile Well, Breathe Well – the Link between Good Oral Health and Your Lungs!

By Dr Matthew Fleming & Dr Dana Horng



Did you know that there is a link between the health of your smile and your lungs?

Traditionally, we have thought of smoking, advanced age, and the presence of other health conditions that weaken the immune system, as risk factors for lung disease. But scientists now believe that gum disease may also be a significant risk factor, increasing the risk of respiratory infections, and potentially worsening respiratory diseases such as pneumonia, bronchitis, emphysema, and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD).

What is the relationship between this periodontal disease and respiratory disease?

More research is needed to confirm how periodontal disease may put people at a higher risk for respiratory disease. What we do know is that mouth infections such as periodontal disease (gum disease) are associated with increased risk of respiratory infection. An analysis of research has revealed that gum disease may be a far more serious threat to your health than previously realised.

Bacterial respiratory infections are caused by inhaling germs from the mouth and throat into the lungs. When these germs reach the lower respiratory tract, they may cause infections or worsen existing lung conditions. Thus, bacteria found in the mouth can cause diseases such as pneumonia, particularly in people with gum disease.

People with respiratory diseases, such as chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), typically suffer from reduced protective systems, making it difficult to eliminate bacteria from the lungs. COPD causes persistent obstruction of the airways.

The main cause of this disease is thought to be long-term smoking. Chemicals from smoke or air pollution irritate the airways to cause obstruction. Further damage to the tissue and working function of the lungs can be prevented, but already damaged tissue cannot be restored—untreated or undetected COPD can result in irreversible damage.

Scientists believe that through the inhaling process, bacteria can cause frequent bouts of infection in patients with COPD. Studies are now in progress to learn to what extent oral hygiene and periodontal disease may be associated with more frequent bouts of respiratory disease in COPD patients.

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