

Obese young adults more likely to have gum disease

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By Martin F. Downs

NEW YORK (Reuters Health) - A new study adds yet another item to the long list of health problems associated with obesity: gum disease.

Dr. Elaine Borawski and colleagues at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland, Ohio, found that obese young adults had a 76 percent higher risk of periodontal disease -- a bacterial infection of the gums that can lead to tooth loss -- than those with normal weight.

What's more, young adults who had larger-than-normal waistlines (40 inches plus for men and 34 for women) were about twice as likely to have gum disease as their slimmer counterparts.

The correlation between obesity and periodontal disease was only seen in the 18-34 age group, and not in older adults.

"It's not that this is a demonstration that it only happens in young people," Borawski told Reuters Health. "The disease itself is mostly an older-adult disease."

Overall, 14 percent of the 13,665 people over age 18 who were studied had periodontal disease. Just eight percent of the young adults had it, compared to 17 percent of middle-aged people, and 20 percent of older adults, according to the report published in the Journal of Periodontology.

The data the researchers analyzed came from the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey III (NHANES III), a U.S. survey conducted from 1988-1994.

Another recent study in Japan came up with similar results. But Borawski said it is too early to say for certain why such a high rate of periodontal disease is seen in obese young adults.

"The next step is to begin exploring," she said.

In general, it's believed that diet plays a role in gum disease. Certain types of foods and the amount consumed may help disease-causing bacteria thrive in the mouth.

Eating fiber-rich foods like fruits and vegetables may reduce the accumulation of dental plaque -- the sticky substance in which bacteria live. A "softer" diet, however, may promote plaque build-up.

It's also possible that obese young adults consume too little of things that are important for good oral health -- namely vitamin C and calcium.

The study findings are worrisome because periodontal disease, in addition to causing tooth loss, may contribute to other diseases.

"We know for sure -- it's confirmed -- that treatment of periodontal disease will reduce the need for treatment of diabetes," said study co-author Dr. Mohammad Al-Zahrani in an interview with Reuters Health.

Periodontal disease may also contribute to heart disease.

"This is not proven," Al-Zahrani said. But he said that doctors are working under the assumption that it's true. Some studies have suggested a link.

In addition, it's well known that obesity puts people at risk for heart disease. Taken all together, "you start to see a bigger picture," Borawski said.

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