

## The link between gingivitis and systemic health: What you should know.

Andrew Shahid Ferdous\*

Department of Dentistry, Abdulaziz University, Saudi Arabia

### Introduction

Gingivitis, the earliest stage of gum disease, is often viewed as a localized oral health issue. Characterized by inflamed, red, and bleeding gums, it is caused by the buildup of plaque along the gumline. While gingivitis itself is reversible with proper care, its implications extend far beyond the mouth [1].

Research has uncovered a strong link between oral health and overall systemic health. Left untreated, gingivitis can progress to periodontitis, a severe gum infection that allows harmful bacteria to enter the bloodstream and contribute to systemic diseases. Understanding this connection emphasizes the importance of maintaining good oral hygiene for your entire body's well-being [2].

Gingivitis begins when plaque, a sticky film of bacteria, accumulates on the teeth and gums. If not removed through regular brushing and flossing, plaque hardens into tartar, which irritates the gums and causes inflammation [3].

Although gingivitis is manageable in its early stages, neglect can lead to chronic inflammation, creating a gateway for bacteria to impact other parts of the body. The mouth is often called the gateway to the body, and poor oral health can have widespread effects. The bacteria involved in gum disease can enter the bloodstream, triggering systemic inflammation and contributing to various health problems [4].

Chronic gum inflammation is associated with an increased risk of cardiovascular diseases, including heart attacks and strokes. The same bacteria that cause gum disease can travel through the bloodstream, causing inflammation in blood vessels and contributing to the formation of arterial plaques [5].

Studies suggest that individuals with untreated gum disease are more likely to experience heart problems than those with healthy gums. The relationship between diabetes and gum disease is bidirectional. People with diabetes are more susceptible to infections, including gingivitis, due to elevated blood sugar levels. Conversely, gum disease can make it harder to control blood sugar levels, exacerbating diabetes symptoms [6].

Inhaling bacteria from the mouth can lead to lung infections or worsen conditions like pneumonia and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD). This is particularly concerning for older adults and those with weakened immune systems [7].

Pregnant individuals with untreated gum disease may face a higher risk of complications, including preterm birth and low

birth weight. The inflammation associated with gum disease is thought to affect the placenta, highlighting the need for excellent oral care during pregnancy [8].

Adopting healthier habits can strengthen your gums and reduce the risk of systemic disease. For advanced cases of gum disease, periodontal therapy, including deep cleaning and possibly surgery, may be necessary. Research suggests a potential link between gum disease and rheumatoid arthritis (RA). Both conditions involve chronic inflammation, and treating gum disease may help reduce RA symptoms in some patients [9].

A diet rich in fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and lean proteins supports both oral and overall health. Limit sugary and acidic foods, which promote plaque formation. Emerging evidence points to a connection between gum disease and neurodegenerative conditions like Alzheimer's disease. Chronic inflammation and the presence of oral bacteria in brain tissue may contribute to cognitive decline [10].

### Conclusion

Gingivitis may seem like a minor dental issue, but its impact on systemic health is far-reaching. From heart disease to diabetes, pregnancy complications, and cognitive decline, the bacteria and inflammation associated with gum disease can affect multiple systems in the body. By prioritizing oral hygiene and addressing gingivitis early, you can protect your smile and improve your overall health. Regular dental visits, a healthy diet, and consistent care are not just investments in your teeth they're investments in your future well-being. Remember, a healthy mouth contributes to a healthy body.

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\*Correspondence to: Andrew Shahid Ferdous, Department of Dentistry, Abdulaziz University, Saudi Arabia. E-mail: andrew@shahidferdous

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