Can Good Oral Hygiene Thwart Heart Problems?

Brushing your teeth several times a day can reduce your risk of atrial fibrillation and heart failure.

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Good oral hygiene protects your teeth and gums. But frequent toothbrushing can also benefit the heart by lowering your risk of atrial fibrillation and heart failure, suggest new findings published in the European Journal of Preventive Cardiology, a journal of the European Society of Cardiology (ESC), reports ESC.

Poor oral hygiene is known to lead to bacteria in the blood, which can cause inflammation. This biological response in the body can increase a person's risk for an irregular heartbeat (atrial fibrillation) and the heart's inability to pump blood or relax and fill with blood (heart failure).

For the study, researchers examined nearly 161,000 participants ages 40 to 79 of the Korean National Health Insurance System to explore the connection between oral hygiene and the two cardiac conditions. (Individuals had no history of either atrial fibrillation or heart failure and underwent a routine medical exam between 2003 and 2004.) Scientists gathered and reviewed information about their height, weight, lab tests, illnesses, lifestyle, oral health and oral hygiene behaviors.

When researchers followed up with participants 10 years later, results showed that 4,911 (3%) of these persons developed atrial fibrillation and 7,971 (4.9%) developed heart failure. In addition, investigators noted that brushing one's teeth three or more times a day resulted in a 10% lower risk of atrial fibrillation and a 12% lower risk of heart failure.

Scientists theorized that recurrent toothbrushing helps to reduce bacteria that live in the pocket between the teeth and gums, thus preventing them from entering the bloodstream.

But since the study was limited to one country and classified as an observational inquiry, authors cautioned that the findings aren't proof of a cause-and-effect relationship.

Researchers concluded that it's too early to recommend toothbrushing for the prevention of both heart ailments.

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