



AUSTRALIAN DENTAL  
ASSOCIATION INC.

Media release  
July 2009

## For Older Australians a Healthy Mouth Means a Healthy Body

Health experts now say taking a look inside the mouth may provide a snapshot of the overall health of the body, especially for those aged over 55 years.

If you are over 55 years of age you should know that recent findings suggest that the improvement of oral health may have a positive impact on your general health, and addressing oral health issues can prevent illness, assist the diagnosis of serious conditions early and maintain optimum overall health<sup>1</sup>.

Dr Neil Hewson, President of the Australian Dental Association (ADA), says indicators for a range of serious diseases that particularly confront those over 55 (but can be equally applicable to us all) such as diabetes, cardiovascular disease, oral cancers and even Alzheimer's and Hodgkin's disease, can often be detected by careful professional examination by dentists of patients' mouths. As Australians get older, they have an increased susceptibility to some common illnesses and early diagnosis of these can prevent some serious consequences.

"Dentists are in a position to look out for symptoms that present within the mouth, which might indicate that a patient may be at risk of a range of different health conditions."

"The ADA has developed a self-check test that allows adults of all ages to answer a couple of simple questions, which may indicate that they might be at risk of these conditions," says Dr Hewson.

**Diabetes** – Gum diseases such as gingivitis (the first stage of periodontal disease) can contribute to higher blood glucose levels. Professional treatment of gum disease, combined with regular brushing and flossing, will reduce infection and can help improve blood glucose levels.

**Cardiovascular disease:** Current evidence suggests periodontal disease (bacterial infection in the gums around the teeth) can lead to systemic inflammation in the arteries, which can in turn lead to cardiovascular disease<sup>2</sup>.

**Oral cancers** – People between 55 and 64 years are most at risk of chronic mouth diseases, including oral cancer<sup>3</sup>. Oral cancer most commonly occurs on the borders of the tongue, on the lips, and on the floor of the mouth. Patients with a white or red lesion that persists for longer than two weeks are encouraged to have their dentist review any unusual lesions.

**Alzheimer's disease** – A recent study revealed that missing teeth and chronic inflammation of the mouth can significantly increase the risk of developing Alzheimer's disease. Systemic inflammation caused by periodontal disease can go on to damage brain tissue which can lead to Alzheimer's disease<sup>4</sup>.

**Hodgkin's disease** – Bacteria that cause gum disease release toxic byproducts into the bloodstream, which can increase levels of blood sugar, cholesterol and C-reactive protein

---

<sup>1</sup> Marshall, S. (2009) A Comprehensive Approach to Improving Oral Health for Seniors. *American Journal of Public Health*, 99(4)

<sup>2</sup> Williams, R.C., et al. (2008) The potential impact of periodontal disease on general health. *Current Medical Research and Opinion*, 24(6)

<sup>3</sup> National Institute of Dental and Craniofacial Research (n.d.) *Detecting Oral Cancer: A Guide for Health Care Professionals*.

<sup>4</sup> Gatz, M., et al. (2005) Potentially modifiable risk factors for dementia: Evidence from identical twins. *Alzheimer's & Dementia*, 1(1)

(CRP). If treatment of gum disease does not lower levels of blood sugar, cholesterol and CRP, it could indicate that a patient has an underlying health condition such as Hodgkin's disease<sup>5</sup>.

**Reduced saliva flow** – Occurs as a result of drugs commonly used in the 55+ age group and the drier mouth can lead to increased tooth decay and soft tissue lesions. Patients need to discuss with their dentist the medications that they are taking, so that the dentist can provide advice on preventative care. Sometimes their doctor may be able to change their medication, which can also help.

As part of Dental Health Week 2009 and its focus on those over 55, the ADA has developed an easy self check test via the ADA website, which can assist in the detection of these conditions.

For more information on oral health management for those 55 plus, and to take the ADA's online self-check test, visit the ADA website – [www.ada.org.au](http://www.ada.org.au)

---

For more information on oral health care in the over 55s or to request an interview with an ADA spokesperson, please contact Porter Novelli Melbourne:

Fleur Jacobs  
Phone: 03 9289 9555  
Mobile: 0439 354 044  
Email: [fjacobs@porternovelli.com.au](mailto:fjacobs@porternovelli.com.au)

Arj Ganeshalingam  
Phone: 03 9289 9555  
Mobile: 0421 690 204  
Email: [aganeshalingam@porternovelli.com.au](mailto:aganeshalingam@porternovelli.com.au)

Sarah Harvie  
Phone: 03 9289 9555  
Mobile: 0402 217 956  
Email: [sharvie@porternovelli.com.au](mailto:sharvie@porternovelli.com.au)

---

<sup>5</sup> n.a. (2007) Can Be First to Detect Some Medical Conditions. *American Health Line*.