



GOOD ORAL HEALTH VITAL TO OVERALL WELLNESS

Tooth decay is a major problem in most industrialised countries, affecting between 60-90% of school children and adults, according to the World Health Organisation. However, poor oral health is often overlooked by consumers despite the fact that it can lead to a number of diseases from cavities to oral cancer and can affect the body's entire immune system, making it difficult to fight off other types of infections.

This is according to Dr Dominique Stott, Executive of Medical Standards and Services at PPS, who says in light of Oral Health Awareness Month in September, it is vital to highlight the importance of good oral hygiene to all South Africans. "People need to bear in mind that good oral hygiene enhances ones' ability to speak, smile, smell, taste, chew or swallow; all of which are necessary daily functions."

"The consequences of poor dental hygiene, apart from being socially unacceptable, are many. Poor dental hygiene can cause periodontal (gum) disease, dental caries (tooth decay), mouth ulcers and possibly oral cancer among other diseases, all which are not only painful but can be very expensive to treat in the long term."

Dr Stott says moderate to advanced gum disease exposes the body to massive amounts of harmful bacteria 24 hours a day, seven days a week, for as long as the infection is present. "The stress this bacterial infection can place on the immune system is significant and it can dramatically reduce the body's ability to fight other infections and diseases."

"Ludwig's angina is an example of a life threatening disease as a result of poor dental hygiene. It is bacterial infection that can be caused by an uncommon complication of an abscess that has been left untreated and causes rapid swelling of the tissues in the mouth and may block the airway or prevent swallowing of saliva."

"It is also vitally important for those with false teeth to ensure they adequately maintain oral hygiene."

Dr Stott says poor oral hygiene can result in the necessity for the replacement of teeth with implants which can be very costly. "Some medical aids, depending on the type of plan, might only pay a portion. Crowning teeth is also costly as numerous visits are required and the costs of the crowns can be substantial."

She affirms the importance of an annual visit to the dentist for most people with normal dentition, even if only for removal of tartar and early identification of caries. "Prevention of oral health diseases through regular brushing, flossing and rinsing alongside regular checkups with a dentist is the best way to mitigate the risks of dental diseases and save money in the end."

Dr Stott says those living with compromised immune systems, such as AIDS patients, leukemia patients and patients with rheumatic heart disease, should also pay special attention to their oral health and must ensure they see a dentist regularly.

"As the adage goes, prevention is better than cure. Ensuring one practices good oral hygiene and visits their dentist regularly is crucial in avoiding oral health diseases and subsequent financial repercussions in the long term," concludes Dr Stott.