A MONTHLY REPORT ON TIMELY HEALTH TOPICS

THIS MONTH: DENTAL CARE

Waging war against

Hygienists leading fight to protect oral, overall health

By Roberta Baker Union Leader Staff

EA ANNE HANEY, a dental hygienist at Northeast Delta Dental, has soldiered on the front lines of mouth care for 45 years, using her gloved fingers, dental tools and jets of water to clean teeth and gums and probe for emerging problems.

Her job goes beyond spotting and scraping off plaque. Hygienists are among the first to detect medical conditions that leave telltale signs in the mouth.

When someone goes for a semi-annual or more frequent cleaning, Haney looks for evidence of oral cancer, diabetes, GERD or gastroesophageal reflux disease, anemia, HIV, osteoporosis and dry mouth — a condition that can wreak havoc with oral health.

"I love to talk about toothbrush technique," said Haney. She also asks about diet (including snacks and beverages), underlying medical conditions and current medications, prescription and over-the-counter.

She scans for lesions under the tongue and on the top and sides of the mouth, spots where tissue is raised or discolored, areas of inflammation and anything brewing at the top of the throat.

"Dental hygienists and dentists see over 100 diseases that show symptoms in the mouth," said Haney, who also visits schools and nursing homes as a public health dental hygienist.

"Systemic diseases have oral manifestations. The dentist is diagnosing and treating disease. I'm looking at a patient's risk factors and individualizing their routine hygiene. I'm a prevention specialist."

A worrisome increase

in plaque

A precursor to problems is plaque, which builds up on teeth at the gum line. Plaque, a combination of bacteria, saliva



Army Private First Class Sheldon Wright checks his smile in the mirror after dental work from Dr. Mitch Couret at his office in Goffstown.

and food particles, is the sticky, pale film that forms on teeth and promotes decay.

Laura Cailler, a hygienist at Nashua Dental Associates, said the switch to remote work during and after COVID seemed to compound the plaque buildup problem. Morning mouth care routines slid or became skewed while people were working at

"We're seeing more plaque than we used to," and it appears to be forming more quickly, she added.

Lapsed mouth care and diets high in sugar and processed food are the likely culprits. Processed foods, flavored seltzers and energy drinks, which are loaded with sugar or artificial sweeteners, and

even apple cider and kombucha can make the mouth more acidic, dentists say. This erodes tooth enamel and hastens the buildup of plaque.

Hot spots include the outside of upper molars and behind the lower front teeth, Cailler said.

"Think about Oreos. It's the sugar content and you chew it. Everyone thinks you swallow it and it's gone. But sugar adheres to the sides of teeth and stays between the teeth," said Dr. Mitch Couret, dentist at Goffstown Smiles and chief dental officer at Northeast Delta Dental. He tells his patients who drink Coke or soft drinks not to sip throughout the day, but drink them within one hour, then rinse their

mouths with water, so their mouths are not continuously bathed in sugar.

"Whenever you leave anything on your teeth, the bacteria have dinner. If you don't floss and brush, you continue to feed them. And the gums get inflamed," Couret said.

Cailler said she has seen a spike in patients in their 20s and 30s with advanced tooth decay, which could come from frequent energy drinks and smoking or vaping.

"A lot of new patients in their 20s have been coming in with intense decay and teeth loss. It's really jarring," she said. "Nine out to ten times you can tell if someone's using a vap-

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No Flavors this week

The monthly NHMedical section takes the place of this week's Flavors section. Flavors, with Our Gourmet, will return next week.

Gum disease: A mouthful of problems that affect the whole body

By Roberta Baker Union Leader Staff

You see your gums when you brush your teeth or smile in the mirror. And you rarely give them a second thought.

But they're a major player in your overall health.

According to data from the American Dental Association, more than 42% of adults who have teeth suffer from advanced gum disease, or periodontitis.

A 2023 report published by Harvard Medical School found that periodontal disease increases the risk of heart disease, chronic respiratory illness, dementia and pregnancy complications. And it's the leading cause of tooth loss, which affects almost one in four people age 60 and older.

The effects of periodontal disease "are far reaching beyond the mouth," said Dr. Michael Goldberg, a consultant for Northeast Delta Dental and a periodontist for 31

Gingivitis, the most common gum inflammation, can be controlled and reversed by good mouth care at home and regular cleaning by a dental hygienist. But plaque, the soft, whitish gunk that builds up on teeth near the gums, can harden into tartar. When bacteria accumulate along the gums, and plaque and tartar progress unabated, gum infections result

"It its early stages it doesn't cause pain. Nobody wakes up and says, 'I have to go to the dentist.' The only red flag is gum bleeding," said Goldberg. "Healthy tissue doesn't bleed.

In the beginning stages of periodontal disease, gums may turn red and become swollen and tender to the touch. They may become sore when you eat. Some people notice a bad odor or bad taste. "If vou see blood in sink basin" repeatedly, he said, that's a sign you shouldn't ignore.

When bacteria go beneath the gum line, their byproducts start to erode the bone, And the bone loss is irreversible.

It's the bone that holds teeth in place," said Goldberg. "Think of the gums as shingles on a roof that resist the rain," shielding the bone

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Skipping the dentist? Here's why it could cost more than just your smile

By Roberta Baker Union Leader Staff

When Dr. Suman Reddivari gazes into the mouths of patients at Manchester Family Dentistry, he scans portraits of their eating, drinking and smoking habits, oral hygiene routines and overall health. He sees threats that can morph into serious, wallet-popping problems if not addressed.

Diets high in processed foods and sugar, Reddivari said, coupled with insufficient tooth and gum care and infrequent or nonexistent dental checkups, are contributing to a rise in cavities a universal ailment that must be treated before decay and infection progress to something worse.

Acidic beverages, such as soft drinks, energy drinks and seltzers flavored with fruit juice, higher rates of marijuana use, and an aging population taking multiple medications — sometimes a dizzying list — are leading to more complaints of dry mouth, he said.

That condition sounds harmless enough, but insufficient saliva causes a host of tooth and gum ailments and reduces someone's

ability to fight infection elsewhere in the body.

Dentists can be the first to spot emerging medical complaints. For instance, bruxism or teeth grinding can be a sign of sleep apnea, which interrupts breathing during sleep. A large tongue that covers a small throat opening is a risk. Sleep apnea, which Reddivari said he's seeing more frequently, increases the risk of heart attacks and dementia.

"My job is not just treating teeth," said the Manchester dentist. "It's connecting the dots. All I can do is give (patients) a way to fix things or maintain things. As a dentist, the best thing I can do is educate people about their options. Dental treatment is expensive," he said, "but the cheapest day is today" — before any condition becomes much more embedded and complex.

"People have to put importance on dental health," he said. "That's the biggest hurdle."

Dr. Jeffrey Vachon of Vachon Dental in Manchester, presidentelect of the New Hampshire

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Dr. Jeffrey Vachon of Vachon Dental, demonstrates a procedure on his daughter Joanna in the Red Sox/Fenway Parkthemed operatory at his office in Manchester. He also has a Boston Bruins-themed room. "It causes fun conversation!" he said.

Smile! Old-school metal braces are making a comeback

By Abby Ellin Special to The Washington Post

Ask Laura Kissinger to smile, and she'll do so happily. Broadly. Widely. Proudly displaying the metal brackets adorning her incisors, molars and canines.

"I'm not embarrassed!" said Kissinger, 47, a bartender in Sierra Vista, Arizona. "People come up to me on the street and they're like, 'I love your braces!' I smile way more

Kissinger's metamorphosis into a bold brace face began two years ago, when she visited Brian Decker, an orthodontist with three offices in the Tucson area. Decker gave her options for fixing the spaces between her teeth: Ceramic or clear brackets, or a transparent aligner such as Invisalign? Kissinger wasn't interested. The former were too expensive and could stain easily. As for the latter, Kissinger didn't trust herself not to accidentally toss the plastic trays into the garbage.

What she really wanted — what she'd always wanted, ever since she was a kid unable to afford orthodonture — were the old-fashioned "electric can openers" sported by Marcia Brady in a particularly painful episode of the "Brady Bunch," Drew Bar-

rymore (aka Josie Grossie) in "Never Been Kissed" and America Ferrera in "Ugly

"They're so endearing looking," said Kissinger. "I don't want them to come

Orthodontists across the country are noticing a rise in interest in the uncool oral train tracks of yore among Gen Z hipsters and adults who have no qualms about broadcasting their perceived imperfections. On the contrary, enthusiasts say, they show that the wearers care about their appearance and can afford to invest in themselves.

"When my practice started, kids and adults didn't want braces," said Decker, who has been receiving requests for metal braces over the past five years. "Now, little girls beg us for them. It's more of a fashion symbol. Many middle-aged females like having braces now, as it adds a sort of youthful or innocent look. I can think of a couple of patients who were begging me not to take them off, and I'm like 'You're done, it's been three years!"

Richard Schechtman, an orthodontist in Santa Maria, California, has seen an uptick in the number of his patients in their 20s and 30s opt for metal braces. "I started noticing this a year ago but thought it was just



Orthodontists have noticed an uptick in patients opting for metal braces. "Braces were associated with stereotypical shame of appearance, but it's much different today," said Richard Schechtman, an orthodontist in Santa Maria, California.

a few of my patients," he says. Out of curiosity, he put a query in a Facebook group he belonged to with orthodontists nationwide. They all reported seeing a similar trend among their patients. "Braces were associated with the stereotypical shame of appearance, but it's much different today," he said.

Happy wearers credit the trend to influencers and models such as Abbey Clancey, Charlie James and Kitty Hayes, whose metal smile graced the

cover of Carine Roitfeld's CR Fashion Book in 2015. More recently, rapper and singer Lil Uzi Vert broadcast his braces, along with his orthodontist, Cassandra Pinkerous, on Instagram.

'No shade to Invisalign, but it's kind of boring to me," said Francis Alvarez, a dental assistant in Brooklvn. Alvarez, 24, had a bad overbite, spaces between his teeth and a lower jaw that jutted out farther than the upper. He appreciated Lil Uzi Vert's "using braces as a form of expression and individuality," and chose them for himself, decorating them with colored rubber bands — green for St. Patrick's Day, rainbow colors for Pride.

"I get that Invisalign is for individuals who are shy about showing others that they are working on themselves, but I'm not timid." he said. "I'm bold, loud and proud about my own journey of improvement and individuality."

For Alvarez and others, metal braces are both a status symbol — they are often rarely is."

not covered by insurance, and can range in price from \$3,000 to \$10,000 — and a desirable accessory. While serving an orthodontic purpose, they allow wearers to express their individuality with colorful rubber bands or "ties," crystals or jewels. ("I have no issues with them doing that as long as they run it by us first — like bring them into the office so we can make sure it's not in the wrong spot," Decker says of adding embellishments to braces.)

The proliferation of fake or fashion braces that can be purchased online attests to the appeal of the real thing. But fakes can be dangerous. A May 2024 report from the American Association of Orthodontists notes that the devices can cause infections, poisoning, choking, oral cuts, tooth damage or misalignment.

Decker speculates that many people are becoming more aware of the downsides of aligners, especially the necessity of wearing them 22 hours a day. "Most people know somebody who has gone through it and for it took forever or they didn't get the results they wanted," he said. "We have more control and precision to move teeth with braces than with plastic, even when patient compliance is perfect, which it

Gum Disease

underneath.

As infection and decay advance beneath the gum line, the teeth can become loose and drift. Eventually, a tooth will fall out or have to be extracted, the gum doctor said.

The bacteria can enter the bloodstream and travel to other parts of the body, including the large blood vessels of the heart.

Dental research shows a correlation between periodontal disease and That's not the only threat. cardiac disease. Diabetics are more susceptible to periodontal disease, which makes it hard to control their blood sugar and A1C, Goldberg added.

Dental research shows that by age 30, roughly 45% of the general population may have gingivitis or

periodontitis. Above age 65, 70% of people have some form of periodontal disease.

Pregnant women with undiagnosed periodontal disease are more likely to deliver premature babies.

"This is entirely prevent-

able with regular, periodic cleanings, brushing and flossing," Goldberg said.

Cleanings should happen every six months or sooner, depending on how severe the gum disease is. Scaling and replaning the teeth removes the tartar that

has hardened, creating a smooth, cleanable surface that can be maintained, he said.

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The mouth is the gateway to the body," said Goldberg. "Preserving gum health is important to preserve the health of the body."

THE WAY IT SHOULD BE





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Dental Care

Dental Society, said Americans overall seem to be more aware and attentive to oral health than decades ago, but he wishes they would take care of their mouths as much as they tend to their bodies.

COVID led to lapsed dental checkups and skipped or delayed procedures, he said, resulting in higher costs for correcting problems that simmered.

During periods of high inflation, economic uncertainty and belt tightening, dental care can drop to the bottom of the to-do list.

"I would love for a paradigm shift to prioritizing oral health as much as they do their overall, systemic health," said Vachon. "That's going to be the best for our population, regardless of what toothbrush they use."

Teeth and gums usually, but not always, warn us with pain and recurrent bleeding when they're ailing. But sometimes disease is brewing below the gums or inside the teeth in places we can't see or feel.

Here's a quick guide to common issues that warrant our attention.

Dry mouth

People are not always aware they have dry mouth until there's a 70% reduction in saliva, said Reddivari.

At root is reduced saliva production. Saliva lubricates your mouth, protects your teeth, neutralizes acid, and helps fight decay and hold dentures in place. It makes it easier to speak and eat, according to the American Dental Association

Smoking, vaping, alcohol and caffeine can worsen dry mouth. So can chemotherapy and radiation treatments for cancer. But a main and increasing cause is polypharmacy — or taking multiple medications

for multiple conditions.

"Sometimes individual meds cause dry mouth," said Vachon. "Sometimes it's the interactions of medications." About 400 medications can cause dry mouth, including some for anxiety, depression, high blood pressure, allergies and sinus congestion, according to the Journal of the American Dental Association.

People with diabetes or Alzheimer's disease, those who've had a stroke, and people who smoke or chew tobacco may experience dry mouth. Regularly drinking alcohol or caffeinated beverages can aggravate it.

People who smoke marijuana may also drink soda, energy drinks and consume lots of snacks — "a deadly combo," said Reddivari.

It's important to tell your dentist about all the prescription and over-thecounter medications you're taking

Decay will start quicker and can become rampant, especially in older patients who take an assortment of medications, said Laura Cailler, a dental hygienist at Nashua Dental Associates. Despite good hygiene, new cavities can form under existing dental work because of a lack of saliva. Without adequate saliva, the mouth becomes more acidic, which hastens the break down of teeth and gums.

The American Dental Association tells patients with dry mouth: Drink water throughout the day or suck on crushed ice. Chew or suck on sugar-free gum or candy. Limit or steer clear of hard-to-chew, spicy, or dry foods, including crackers and chips. Use lip balm, and try running a humidifier at night.

Sleep apnea

An estimated 30 million Americans, including chil-



ROVIDED BY DR. SUMAN

Dr. Suman Reddivari of Manchester Family Dental said: "People have to put importance on dental health. That's the biggest hurdle."

dren, are estimated to suffer from obstructive sleep apnea, which interrupts normal breathing and can have major health repercussions if not addressed.

For decades the standard treatment has been CPAP, an air-pumping machine connected by tubes to a face mask, which forces air into the windpipe while people sleep.

Compliance studies have shown that only 30% to 40% of people with CPAP con-

tinue to use them, said Dr. Stephen Cohen, a dentist at Nashua Dental Associates who is trained in sleep dentistry.

Dental appliances that pull back the jaw, allowing the tongue to relax without covering the throat, can be less cumbersome and better tolerated than CPAP, especially for patients with mild to moderate sleep apnea.

Dentists can't officially diagnose sleep apnea, but

they can spot signs in the mouth and consult with physicians who can order sleep studies and prescribe treatment options.

Impacted wisdom teeth

According to the Mayo Clinic and Cleveland Clinic, wisdom teeth — our third molars — typically emerge between ages 17 and 26, and not everyone develops them. About 53% of the general population has at least one wisdom

tooth

A partially impacted wisdom tooth shows some of its crown. A fully impacted wisdom tooth never breaks through the gums. Wisdom teeth can grow sideways into a neighboring tooth, straight up or down, or horizontally within the iawbone.

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Symptoms of ailing wisdom teeth include red, swollen, tender or bleeding gums, pain and swelling around the jaw, bad breath or a bad taste in your mouth, or difficulty opening your mouth.

Dental x-rays at regular intervals can spot impacted wisdom teeth before any symptoms start. There's no need to remove them if they're not causing problems.

The root of the problem

Roughly 15 million root canals are performed yearly across the U.S., according to the Cleveland Clinic.

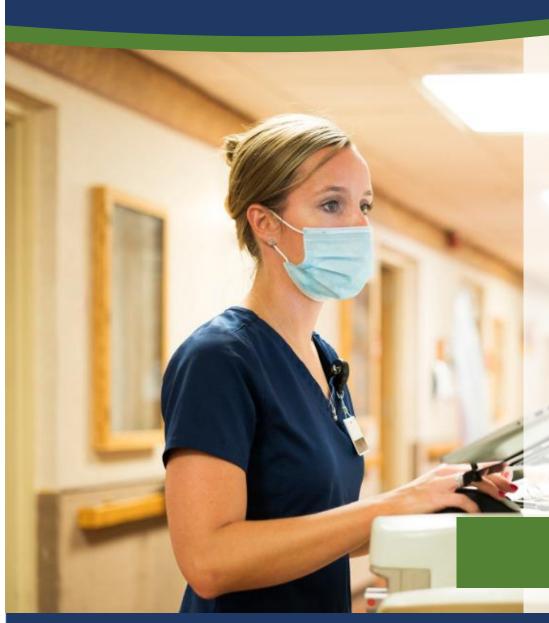
"People are wanting to save their teeth more and root canals are a way to do that," said Vachon at the Dental Society.

Root canal procedures remove inflamed or infected pulp on the inside of a tooth, which is then cleaned, disinfected, filled and sealed. The goal is to eliminate bacteria from the tooth's root canal, prevent reinfection and salvage the natural tooth.

According to the American Association of Endodontists, root canals are often needed for cracked teeth, deep cavities and decay and infection simmering under previous fillings. The treatment is similar to getting a filling, and saving the tooth helps preserve normal chewing, bite force and tooth sensation

Generally, restoring the tooth is less expensive than extracting and replacing it with an implant or bridge.

SAVE NEW HAMPSHIRE NURSING HOME CARE



Solid bipartisan efforts to improve care funding must continue. Through January, wage costs alone for nursing homes were up 34% since February 2020. If facilities can't afford to hire staff within the limits of state Medicaid reimbursement they must deny admissions. This can prevent hospitals from discharging patients, and forces Granite Staters to wait for vital care.

For more information, see savenhseniors.com

MORE HELP in Concord is needed so facilities can recruit, and retain, staff to serve the most vulnerable Granite Staters.

NH CA

Plaque

ing device. You can really see heavy plaque on their teeth."

Select your tools

When it comes to prevention at home, the rule of thumb is to floss between teeth, then brush with a soft brush for at least two minutes. And, if possible, Reddivari said, follow with a water flosser and a fluoride rinse.

Mouth care rituals vary greatly between individuals — what they will tolerate and make time for.

"Many are not doing it effectively," said Cailler.

When it comes to toothpaste, Cailler tells most patients to choose a basic one with fluoride and a taste they like. She said whitening toothpastes can abrade tooth enamel over time.

People with sensitive teeth should select a product designed for sensitive teeth. An example is Sensodyne. Folks who avoid fluoride can opt instead for toothpastes that contain hydroxyapatite, which has been recommended for rebuilding tooth enamel.

Haney points patients to CloSys, an ADA-recommended toothpaste with fewer additives, an anti-microbial agent and no sodium lauryl sulfate, mint (which can irritate), dyes or alcohol.

When it comes to toothbrushes, soft is the golden

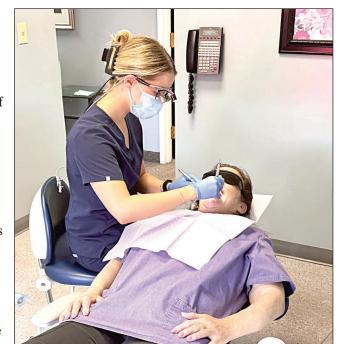
"Use a hard toothbrush to clean tile grout, not your mouth. Your teeth can handle it, but gum tissue cannot," said Cailler.

Pain with brushing or flossing can come from pushing too hard. "You don't have to use a lot of pressure to be effective," Cailler said.

The importance of routine checkups

Dental inspections at regular intervals should

start within six months of



NASHUA DENTAL ASSOCIATES

Dental hygienist Laura Cailler works with a patient at Nashua Dental Associates.

the first tooth that comes in and before a child's first birthday, according to the most recent guidelines from the American Dental Association.

While attention to dental health appears to be rising among most Americans, early care and guidance is often missed, and it's important for a lifelong healthy mouth, said Dr. Jeffrey Vachon, incoming president of the New Hampshire Dental Society and a dentist in Manchester.

in Manchester. Dr. Mitch Couret, dentist at Goffstown Smiles and chief dental officer at Northeast Delta Dental, said fear and finances often determine how often someone goes to the dentist. People can be dissuaded by unpleasant past experiences and unsettling stories from family and friends. Some are motivated by appearance concerns. Dental care, especially when delayed or complex, can

become expensive quickly.

"Patients have to be proactive rather than reactive,"

said Dr. Michael Goldberg, a gum specialist and consultant to Northeast Delta Dental. "Prevention is worth its weight in gold."

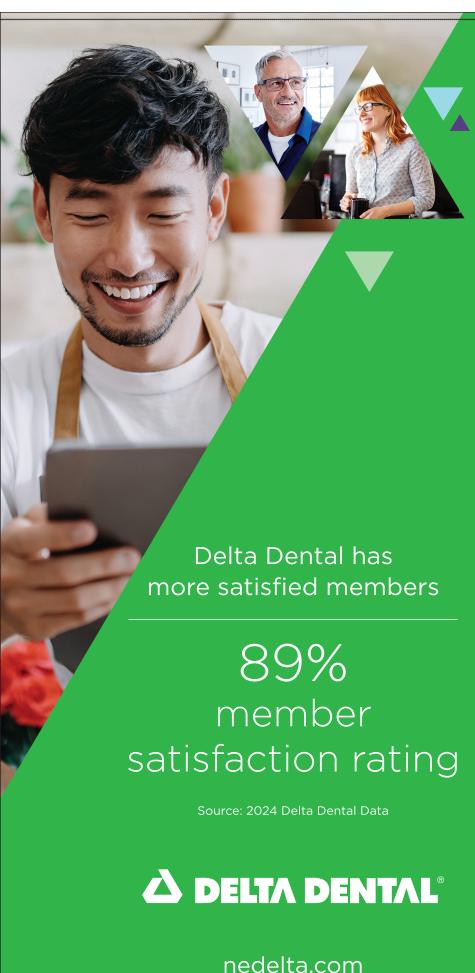
In the end, pain drives

patients to dentists.

"People will brush, spit out and see blood and not act on it because it isn't causing pain," said Goldberg, whereas a toothache, large swelling or broken tooth brings people in as soon as possible.

Twice-yearly dental cleanings and checkups have been recommended for more than 100 years, said Haney.

Every nine months or once a year may be sufficient for people who don't get cavities and have hard teeth and pale pink gums, she said. But those with frequent or recent decay, tartar buildup, pain or bleeding with brushing or flossing, or any known mouth, gum, tooth ailment or weakness or chronic medical issue are often advised to go every three or four months.



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