

“Making Healthcare Work”

Why flossing is good for your heart.

Producer: Paul Felice
Writer: Don McGee



Horizon Blue Cross Blue Shield of New Jersey

Making Healthcare Work

NPR-like theme music up briefly and then under

Don: Hello, and welcome to another edition of “Making Healthcare Work,” a production of Horizon Blue Cross Blue Shield of New Jersey. My name is Don McGee. Today’s topic is Dental Health and its importance to your overall health. It may surprise you just how significant the connection is. My guests today are two doctors from Horizon Blue Cross and Blue Shield of New Jersey. The first is a family practitioner by training, and he’s also a Medical Director with the company, Dr. Chris Valerian. Welcome to the show, Dr. Valerian.

Dr. Valerian: Thanks, Don. I’m glad to be here.

Don: Also joining me is a dentist, who is an Assistant Vice President with Horizon Blue Cross Blue Shield of New Jersey’s Dental company. He is Dr. George McMurray. Dr. McMurray thanks for joining us today.

Dr. McMurray: It’s my pleasure. Glad to be here.

Dr. McMurray, let’s get right to it: What is the connection between good dental health and overall health?

Dr. McMurray: Well Don, there’s a growing body of evidence that proves that good oral and good general health go hand in hand. In fact, in the Surgeon General’s report, on oral health, he shows that the two are inseparable.

Don: It appears as though a lot of people just don’t make the connection between proper dental health and overall health. Why is that?



Dr. McMurray: The reason is because, for years, both dental and medical professionals have been separated. Everyone has worked within their own specialty. And now that we have a body of evidence that really proves that good oral health is good general health, and good general health is good oral health, we've got the connection, now we want everybody to know: the two are inseparable.

Don: When we were in school, in high school health class, I don't remember hearing anything about this connection. What is it you want people to know?

Dr. McMurray: We want them to know that good oral health is just not a pretty smile. That you also have gum tissue, and other tissues in the mouth, that may become diseased and cause other problems. Previously, we only thought about "teeth." But now, good oral health is not just about teeth.

Don: Dr. Valerian, how about the work that our General Practitioners and Family Doctors do? Do these doctors generally talk to their patients about the connection between dental health and medical health?

Dr. Valerian: Well, I wish I could say, "Of course they do, Don." But, that's just not the case. Most doctors know of the connection, for sure, but there hasn't been enough focus on the issue. At Horizon Blue Cross Blue Shield of New Jersey, we want to bring that focus and provide information to our members and our network physician, so that we can improve our members' health and detect health problems earlier. This will help improve our members' quality of life and cut down on their future health care costs.

Don: And, we're not talking about anything special here, doctor. I mean routine dental check ups can help diagnose a wide variety of diseases. Isn't that right, Dr. McMurray?

Dr. McMurray: Yes it is, Don. Routine dental visits were about looking for cavities, but now we're really looking at the whole person. So, when you go for a dental exam now, you're getting a thorough exam. In fact, he's looking for oral cancer. He's looking for gum disease. And, you also might be referred back to your family physician for a follow-up.

Don: Obviously, you want to have patients see a dentist twice a year. What are the basics, that every patient should have when they go to see the dentist?

Dr. McMurray: Brush after every meal. Floss. And use toothpaste with fluoride. If you do these basic things, you will maintain good oral health, but you also need to visit the dentist at least twice a year.

Don: Great. Now, Dr. Valerian, it might surprise some of our listeners to learn about some diseases that a dentist might be the first one to spot. Could you give us an example?

Dr. Valerian: Sure. And, it's not always that obvious. But sometimes your dentist could be the first one to spot diabetes.

Don: Diabetes?

Dr McMurray: That's what the man said.

Don: Could you, uh, could you please explain that.



Dr. Valerian: Well, we don't know the exact cause of diabetes, but we all know it's a growing problem in the United States. 17 million Americans have it, and another 5 million probably have it but are unaware that they do. People with diabetes can often have gum disease, inflamed gums, dry mouth, or a burning sensation in the mouth or on the tongue. Gum disease, also known as periodontal disease, is a bacterial infection and people with uncontrolled diabetes are more likely to have it. When a dentist discovers gum disease in a patient, that's a perfect time to suggest that he or she be checked for diabetes.

Dr. McMurray: Which is important because we all know that diabetes can lead to a host of other serious problems like kidney disease, blindness, even heart disease.

Don: Heart disease is actually another illness that, in some cases, could be prevented by seeing a dentist regularly. Can you explain, Dr. McMurray?

Dr. McMurray: Sure, Don. First, you have to remember that the mouth is home to some nasty bacteria. Now as long as these bacteria stay home, in the mouth, they're not harmful. But, if they should enter the bloodstream, they could bring on some heart disease. Or, if someone has a preexisting heart condition, if certain bacteria get into the bloodstream and work their way to the heart, they could make the condition even worse.

Don: When you explain them, these things seem so obvious, but as we discussed earlier, most of us simply don't make the connection between good dental health and overall health.

Dr. Valerian: Well I have another one for you, Don.



Don: Uh-uh.

Dr. Valerian: How about this: There is some data that suggests that gum disease can be linked to premature birth and low birth weight babies.

Don: Really? Explain that, please, Dr. Valerian?

Dr. Valerian: Well, some research shows that certain bacteria found in the mouth might cause biochemical reactions that trigger premature birth. As you know, premature babies are often underweight, and are born with any number of medical complications. Again, I'm talking about early data, but it is thought that an expectant woman's gum disease may increase the probability of premature birth.

Don: I'd guess that most listeners would never have made a connection between an expectant mother's dental health and her unborn child.

Dr. McMurray: And, Don, a pregnant woman with chronic periodontal disease during the second trimester is up to seven times more likely to give birth prematurely. Seven times!

Don: Wow. So, I'm sure you're recommending that expectant mothers make sure they visit their dentist during their pregnancy.

Dr. McMurray: We do, but most expectant mothers don't. The American Dental Association says most pregnant women won't visit a dentist - even if they're having dental problems. That's too bad. Because it's critical for pregnant women to see their dentist and mention any symptoms they may be having. Your dentist

may even recommend an extra cleaning during the latter stages of your pregnancy.

Don: We've covered a lot and we're almost out of time, gentleman. Any other diseases that routine dentistry might be able to detect early on? Dr. Valerian?

Dr. Valerian: Well, I know we don't have a lot of time to go into the details, but let me just mention a couple of others.

Don: Sure.

Dr. Valerian: Oral Cancer is one. Chronic Kidney Disease is another. And, even Osteoporosis. And, you know, the bottom line is - there is a direct connection between good oral health and good overall health. And, the fact of the matter is, that your dentist may be the first doctor that can detect early signs of some of these chronic conditions.

Don: Dr. McMurray, a final thought?

Dr. McMurray: Yeah, Don. I hope listeners remember, "Knowledge is Power." We've given a lot of information out today, and I would like to remind listeners not to be afraid of that. The more you know, the better you can help maintain your health and the health of those you love. So, keep seeing your dentist regularly, brush twice a day with fluoride toothpaste, floss everyday, and remember one more very important thing...

Don: What's that?

Dr. McMurray: Just keep on smiling!

Dr. Valerian: I knew he was going to say that.

Don: Well, we'll aim to do just that. Good advice, Dr. McMurray.

Dr. George McMurray is a dentist and an Assistant Vice President with Horizon Blue Cross Blue Shield of New Jersey's Dental company.

And, Dr. Chris Valerian, a family practitioner, is one of Horizon Blue Cross Blue Shield of New Jersey's Medical Directors. Gentlemen, thank you both for your time and for some very helpful information.

Dr. McMurray: Your welcome, Don.

Dr. Valerian: Thank you.

Don: And, thank you for joining us for today's podcast on dental health and its relation to overall health.

The "Making Healthcare Work" Podcast Series is a production of Horizon Blue Cross Blue Shield of New Jersey.

Until next time, this is Don McGee.

(Music up and out)




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