

ORAL INFECTION:

# PREVENTION IS THE KEY

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It is well-known in the oral health field that untreated cavities and eventual dental infection can be a breeding ground for bacteria, which can spread to other body sites, especially in

patients suffering from weak immune systems stemming from chronic disease, autoimmune disease, malignancies, or diabetes – and, of course, even patients with a healthy immune system are at risk. The concept of bacteremia is also well studied; bacteremia is the presence of live bacteria in the bloodstream. Bacteremia could occur after an oral surgical procedure, dental extraction, dental cleaning, gum surgery, or due to an ongoing chronic or progressing acute oral infection. Dissemination of oral bacteria could occur in as short as one minute follow-

ing an oral surgical procedure and reach main organ systems. However, our complex immune system is constantly protecting us from this. An oral cavity is a unique site as it is not considered sterile at any time; therefore, any bacteria breaking through the mucosal barrier or other anatomical barriers can cause bacteremia.

Reported cases of dental infection seeding into the brain, heart, or backbone are not unheard of and all of these reported “extreme” cases have been experienced by myself and by other practitioners at some point in their career. However, dental infections more commonly affect the neck, face, and jaw. This becomes apparent with facial swelling or a swelling extending into the neck, below the jaw line, or with a similar variation. If the acute infection is not dealt with, then the swelling will affect swallowing and later breathing. Recovering from these kinds of infections creates a physiological and cost burden to the patient, not to mention these diseases are potentially life-threatening.

Therefore, it would be fair to summarize that simply, prevention is the key in any health matter in this century. It is a preventive practice to get checked by your dentist in a regular recall system for series of surveillance dental radiographic imaging, dental exams, and dental cleanings; this way a progressive chronic infection in the jaw bone can be identified, even if it is not showing any obvious signs. Once identified, the patient can be treated with a root canal or the extraction of the tooth. In 20<sup>th</sup> century and before, populations generally suffered from mostly infectious and communicable disease. However, after the invention of antibiotics, antivirals, antifungals, and the preventive understanding of infection control standards, the trend of diseases tipped more towards chronic and autoimmune diseases, at least in the western world. Although we have come a long way, we can do better in the dental field to prevent dental infections – this starts with patients’ regular dental care with their trusted dentist via a recall system, cleanings, periodic exams, and radiographic images so potential problems can be caught earlier. ■

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