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FRIDAY, March 10 (HealthDay News) -- Raising a glass to a new weapon against periodontal disease, researchers say red wine may help keep gums healthy and strong.

Though the results have so far only been borne out in the test tube, a team of Canadian scientists believe antioxidant components in red wine and grape seeds have anti-inflammatory effects that may ward off periodontal troubles.

"Our findings demonstrate that red wine polyphenols have potent antioxidant properties," conclude researchers led by Dr. Fatiah Chandad from the Universite Laval in Quebec City. Her team presented its findings Friday at the American Association for Dental Research (AADR) annual meeting, in Orlando.

Experts believe that upwards of 80 percent of Americans are estimated to have some form of gum disease, either in the relatively mild form known as gingivitis or in a more serious form, known as periodontitis. Periodontitis (meaning "around the tooth") is linked to poor oral hygiene. It is a chronic infection involving bacteria present in plaque that persistently coats teeth.

"I am optimistic that components in red wine can limit the effect of this oral bacteria," Chandad said.

According to the AADR, approximately 15 percent of Americans between the ages of 21 and 50 suffer from this harshest form of gum disease. Among adults over the age of 50, 65 percent are affected.

Smokers, diabetics and those taking steroids, oral contraceptives and certain cancer drugs are a higher risk for developing periodontitis, often in the absence of any obvious warning signs.

And gum disease's effect may extend beyond the mouth: Recent research has indicated that the inflammation and immune responses which accompany serious gum infection may also provoke an increased risk for diabetes, heart disease and birthing abnormalities among periodontal patients.

However, the Quebec researchers say laboratory tests conducted on mouse cell

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samples revealed that antioxidants found in red wine known as polyphenols may help limit the severity of bacteria-linked gum inflammation.

They note that inflammation is the immune system's natural response to the presence of such bacteria. Unfortunately, that response also involves the accelerated production of unhealthy molecules called "free radicals."

The production of too many free radicals can lead to a further weakening of gums. The result is inflammation, bleeding, and a gradual tissue and bone decay that can ultimately result in the loss of one or more affected teeth.

But Houde and her colleagues found that -- in the test tube, at least -- red wine polyphenols inhibit key proteins at the cellular level to slow free radical production. They speculate that red wine's antioxidant punch could be a useful weapon in the fight against gum disease.

Not everyone is ready to gulp down a glass of Cabernet to fight gum disease, however. Robert Genco, a distinguished professor of oral biology with the School of Dental Medicine at the State University of New York at Buffalo, stressed the findings are very preliminary.

"I would say that in general these experiments with antioxidants in test tubes give variable results when they are later tested in animals or humans," Genco noted.

He pointed to recent studies that found that the consumption of popular antioxidants such as vitamin E, vitamin C and beta carotene does not appear to provide the health benefits that had been anticipated by the medical community.

"Many antioxidants have been tested in humans, and they have not been too effective," Genco stressed. "We've been very disappointed, so we have to be very careful. So, while this study is an interesting first start, the key now is clinical trials in humans."

Chandad agreed that further studies are needed, but said she's optimistic that these early results will be replicated in animals and humans. Her team has already begun such work, she said -- first with animals, then soon after with human trials.

### More information

For more on periodontal disease, visit the [American Dental Association](#).

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