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Gum disease linked to head and neck cancer

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NEW YORK (Reuters Health) - The health hazards associated with chronic periodontitis (gum disease) extend way beyond the mouth. For years people have been warned that persistent periodontitis can cause heart disease. Now a new study suggests that gum disease may also be a risk factor for cancers of the head and neck.

As reported in the journal *Cancer Epidemiology, Biomarkers, and Prevention*, the study included 266 patients with cancers of the head or neck treated between 1999 and 2005, and 207 control subjects.

Periodontitis was determined by alveolar bone loss seen on x-rays, Dr. Mine Tezal, from The State University of New York, Buffalo, and colleagues note. Alveolar bone is the ridge of bone that surrounds the roots of the teeth, holding them in place. Loss of this bone is typically seen with severe periodontal disease.

With each millimeter of alveolar bone loss, the risk of head and neck cancer increased more than 4-fold, the report indicates. (One millimeter is about the size of the head of a pin.) The link was seen even in subjects who had never used tobacco and alcohol.

"Confirmatory studies ... are needed," Dr. Tezal said in a statement.

SOURCE: *Cancer Epidemiology, Biomarkers, and Prevention*, September 2009.

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