

Another Good Excuse?

Who really needs another excuse not to have dental work? Some research is meaningful, but a recent study raises more questions than it answers (which is really what research is supposed to do). But the conclusion reported in the media was that invasive dental surgery may increase the likelihood of heart attack and stroke.

Well, it does make a good headline--but the reporter put more into it than was there. The specifics of the study are more interesting. Keep in mind that it was just one British study of Medicaid data from a drug company that sells drugs to reduce the risk of heart attack and stroke.

An association was first noted with other invasive surgeries and heart attack/stroke incidents. This new study tried to determine any association with dental procedures (extractions and other oral surgeries). The incidence was very small, and included strokes and heart attacks up to 4 weeks after these invasive dental procedures.

This study did not include information on the drugs these patients were taking. We usually have patients stop taking blood thinners before surgical procedures. This could be one explanation for the increase, but was not addressed by the study. Irregular flossing has also been shown to cause a transient bacteremia in the presence of periodontal disease. So it may be no more harmful than flossing. It also did not assess periodontal health before the surgery.

This is just one study--many others have found a more tangible link between untreated periodontal disease and increased rate of heart attack. A cardiologist who reviewed the new study noted that it was not designed to determine if dental procedures caused heart attack or stroke, only if there was an association. He concluded, "... I don't think people should look at this as a reason to be concerned."

Don't cancel that appointment yet.