

a young at heart smile

According to the 2000 US Census, there are nearly 35 million people in the U.S. 65 years of age or older and the number is expected to increase dramatically over the next few decades. People are living longer, healthier lives and this poses new challenges for dentists and oral health-care providers.

Patients want a healthy mouth and to retain their teeth much longer than in years past. The old saying “getting long in the tooth” used to describe someone who was getting older. As funny as it sounds, there is some scientific validity to this. As we age, our risk for diseases increase and a sign of periodontal disease is gum recession, which makes the teeth look longer.

Periodontal disease is a condition that affects the supporting structures of the teeth, namely the bone and gums. It is caused by bacteria buildup on the roots of the teeth, which causes the destruction of the bone supporting the teeth. Many times it goes undetected until the teeth begin to loosen and then it's too late. If detected early, the bone loss can be minimized by simply removing the bacteria.

Detection is done through a periodontal examination administered by a dentist during a regular checkup. Using a probe, the depth of the gingival sulcus surrounding each tooth is measured. The gingival sulcus is the area of potential space between a tooth and the surrounding tissue. The deeper the sulcus, the more advanced the periodontal disease.

Periodontal disease is the number one cause of tooth loss in older patients and has also been linked to a higher risk of heart problems, including high blood pressure, heart attack and stroke. Many older patients are already taking medications for, or are worried about these conditions and these variables are making this disease more dangerous.

According to the CDC, seniors are particularly prone to developing periodontal disease. About 23% of adults age 65 to 74 have severe periodontal disease and men are more likely to suffer from this than women.

So remember, to keep those “pearly whites” for a lifetime, it is important to get regular dental checkups, however “young-at-heart” you are. ■