How Your Dentist Can Help

by SHARON BOYD

Oral Manifestations of Osteoporosis

Believe it or not, your dentist may be the first person to find out that you have osteoporosis, or advanced symptoms of the condition. The NIAMS says that dentists who take panoramic films on their patients are very successful in identifying people with osteoporosis. When dentists suspect an osteoporosis diagnosis, patients should be referred to a specialist. If possible, have your dentist email or fax a copy of your radiograph to your rheumatologist or PCP. These days, most dentists use digital radiography, making the images very easy to share with other professionals when it comes to improving patient care.

Most of the time, panoramic films are taken at:

- New patient exams.
- Wisdom tooth problems.
- Dental emergencies.
- Orthodontic evaluations.
- Every 3-5 years on existing patients.

If bone quantity is reduced, it is frequently visible on these films, because a pano x-ray involves the entire jaw bone from one side of the mouth to the other. Not only are the teeth and jaw visible, but the maxillary sinuses and area around the TMJ are as well. Loss of bone in the jaw is a reliable reflection of the loss of bone throughout other parts of the body.

Loss of bone in the jaw also typically causes loss of the bone known as the "alveolar process." This is the bony process on top of the jaw that teeth are anchored into place by. Losing alveolar bone will cause tooth mobility and loss of teeth, whether or not gum disease is present.

If bone loss occurs in the jaw, you may begin to experience:

- Loose fitting dentures or partial dentures.
- Loose teeth.
- Receding gumlines.
- Forms of gum disease.

Preventive Care

Gum disease can accelerate bone loss around the teeth (and loss of the teeth altogether). Regular preventive care is extremely important, and more frequent dental cleanings can help you remain in a disease-free state in the tissues around your teeth. If periodontal disease (gum disease) is found, then seek proactive care in a timely manner. Otherwise, the condition will work deeper under the gumlines, destroying the bone in the jaw. If you smoke, you're predisposing your teeth to gum disease that may not respond to professional treatment.

Discontinue using tobacco products as quickly as possible. This will increase blood flow to the area so that antibodies can respond to oral infections better.

Sleeping in your removable prosthesis (e.g., your dentures) can accelerate the amount of bone loss that you experience. The excess pressure on oral tissues causes bone to resorb. Take all dentures or partial dentures out at night, soaking them in a denture cleanser and brushing them before placing them back in your mouth the next morning. If your denture or partial denture isn't fitting properly, it's most likely because further bone loss has taken place. Ask your dentist about relining the prosthesis or making you a new one. Loose prosthetics will cause sore spots and excess pressure on certain areas of the bone.