

Baby Boomers Approaching Prime Age for Periodontal Disease

Baby boomers typically have grown up with good smiles. They are the first generation to benefit from advances in dental science made during World War II and are the first children to grow up with the practice of regular check-ups and fluoridated water systems. As a result, they are the first generation to approach older age with the common expectation of retaining all or most of their natural teeth.

Periodontal disease is a slow-process disease that gets worse over time. Now in middle age, if baby boomer individuals have not had routine care and prevented advanced periodontal disease along the way, maintenance will require more extensive and more expensive treatment.

More importantly, periodontal disease is increasingly being linked to major systemic diseases such as diabetes, heart disease, adverse pregnancy outcomes, and rheumatoid arthritis. Basically, any disease that has an inflammatory component can be worsened by periodontal disease.

“When everything is added together,” says Jesús Galván, D.D.S., Dental Director for Delta Dental of New Mexico, “the greater severity of periodontal disease and the greater number of major systemic diseases as a population ages, together impose a significantly higher risk to baby boomers.”

Boomers, more than any generation before, will take significantly more medications into old age. A common side effect with many medications is dry mouth. Without the healing, lubricating, and cleansing properties of adequate saliva, periodontal disease and dental decay both escalate and resist control and maintenance.

At any age, smoking and other tobacco products increase the risk for periodontal disease, not to mention the risk of oral cancer. Smoking so compromises the treatment of advanced periodontal disease that some periodontists (gum specialists) will not treat a person until he or she stops smoking.

“In terms of oral disease in older age,” advises Dr. Galván, a Boomer himself, “prevention can still play a major role. Brush, floss, and visit your dentist’s office regularly.”