

“Generally, in a spirit of hope, we ask our teeth to last several decades longer for us than they did for our grandparents,” says Chapel Hill Dentist Dr. C. Michael Willock.

“And, while there are still many potential dental problems as we age, there have been dramatic improvements in dental care that typically extend the healthy life of our teeth by many years.”

Key dental health issues that need special attention as we age, says Dr. Willock, include missing teeth, dental cavities, periodontal disease, oral and throat cancers, amalgam fillings, dry mouth, and facial pain, among numerous others.

“Of these problems, oral cancers and periodontal disease are of greatest concern,” he notes, “and for some people, removal of amalgam fillings is an important health issue.

ORAL CANCER

“Every hour, around the clock, we have another death in this country from oral cancer,” notes Dr. Willock. “Deaths from oral cancer are more prevalent than deaths from brain, liver, testes, kidney, or ovarian cancer.

“What is particularly challenging about this disease, which is more common in our aging population, is that, even though we have an 80 to 90 percent cure rate for oral cancer patients with early detection, fewer than half of these patients are five-year survivors—because oral cancer typically is not detected in early stages.”

Dentists, he says, “are the first line of defense in early detection of oral cancer. Oral cancers in early stages are often painless, and thus out of the awareness of patients, al-

though the condition is often detectable upon examination. Studies show that fewer than 15 percent of people who visit a dentist regularly have an annual cancer screening exam—and a good screening can be done in about five minutes. If we double or triple or quadruple that 15 percent figure of those having regular exams, the death rate from oral cancer would decrease dramatically.”

BLEEDING GUMS

Without good oral health, attaining optimal general health is an elusive and basically unattainable goal, which becomes increasingly true as people age, Dr. Willock believes.

“In extensive and on-going research, the American Academy of Periodontology (AAP) continues to make the case: infections in the mouth can cause major health problems in other organ systems in the body. The connections to diabetes, heart disease, and other illnesses is well-established. Healthy gums are a key component of overall good health.

“AAP studies make clear that periodontal bacteria can enter the blood stream

and travel to major organs and begin new infections.” The consequences, he says, may include:

- Involvement with the development of heart disease, the country’s number one cause of death;
- An increased risk of stroke;
- An increase in a woman’s risk of having a pre-term, low birth-weight baby;
- A serious threat to people whose health is compromised by diabetes, respiratory diseases, or osteoporosis.

“It may seem unlikely that a little bleeding of the gums may signal the onset or possibility of a major health problem, but it is nonetheless true,” Dr. Willock says. And the problem is pervasive: “Estimates are that 15 percent of adults to age 50 and 30 percent of adults over 50 have periodontal disease—and the incidence increases significantly among pregnant women. As many as 80 percent of adults have some form of periodontal disease when we include the early stage, called gingivitis.”

Dr. Willock encourages his patients of both sexes and all ages to protect their oral health. “Part of that process,” he says, “is to have regular dental exams and a periodontal evaluation. Sometimes the only way to detect periodontal disease is through such an exam. It is especially important if you:

- Notice any symptoms of periodontal disease;
- Have heart disease, diabetes, respiratory disease, or osteoporosis;
- Are pregnant or thinking of becoming pregnant;

- Have a family member with periodontal disease. Research suggests that the bacteria that cause periodontal disease can pass through saliva. This means the common contact of saliva in families puts children and couples at risk for contracting the periodontal disease of another family member or a pet.
- Have a sore or irritation in your mouth that does not get better within two weeks.

MERCURY IN THE MOUTH

Dr. Willock has long expressed concern about the use of amalgam material containing mercury to fill dental cavities, and he notes that for the first time, the Food and Drug Administration, on its website, has indicated similar unease.

“There has been a long-standing debate about potential health problems for some people who are exposed to mercury, which may leak from amalgam fillings,” says Dr. Willock. “This response by the FDA to a lawsuit presented by Moms Against Mercury and other advocacy groups, including the International Academy of Oral Medicine and Toxicology (IAOMT), is likely to be an important step in clarifying conflicting claims.”

As part of the settlement, the FDA notes on its website that “Dental amalgams contain mercury, which may have neurotoxic effects on the nervous systems of developing children and fetuses. When amalgam fillings are placed in teeth or removed from teeth, they release mercury vapor. Mercury vapor is also released during chewing. FDA’s rulemaking will examine evidence concerning whether release of mercury vapor can cause health problems, including neurological disorders, in children and fetuses.”

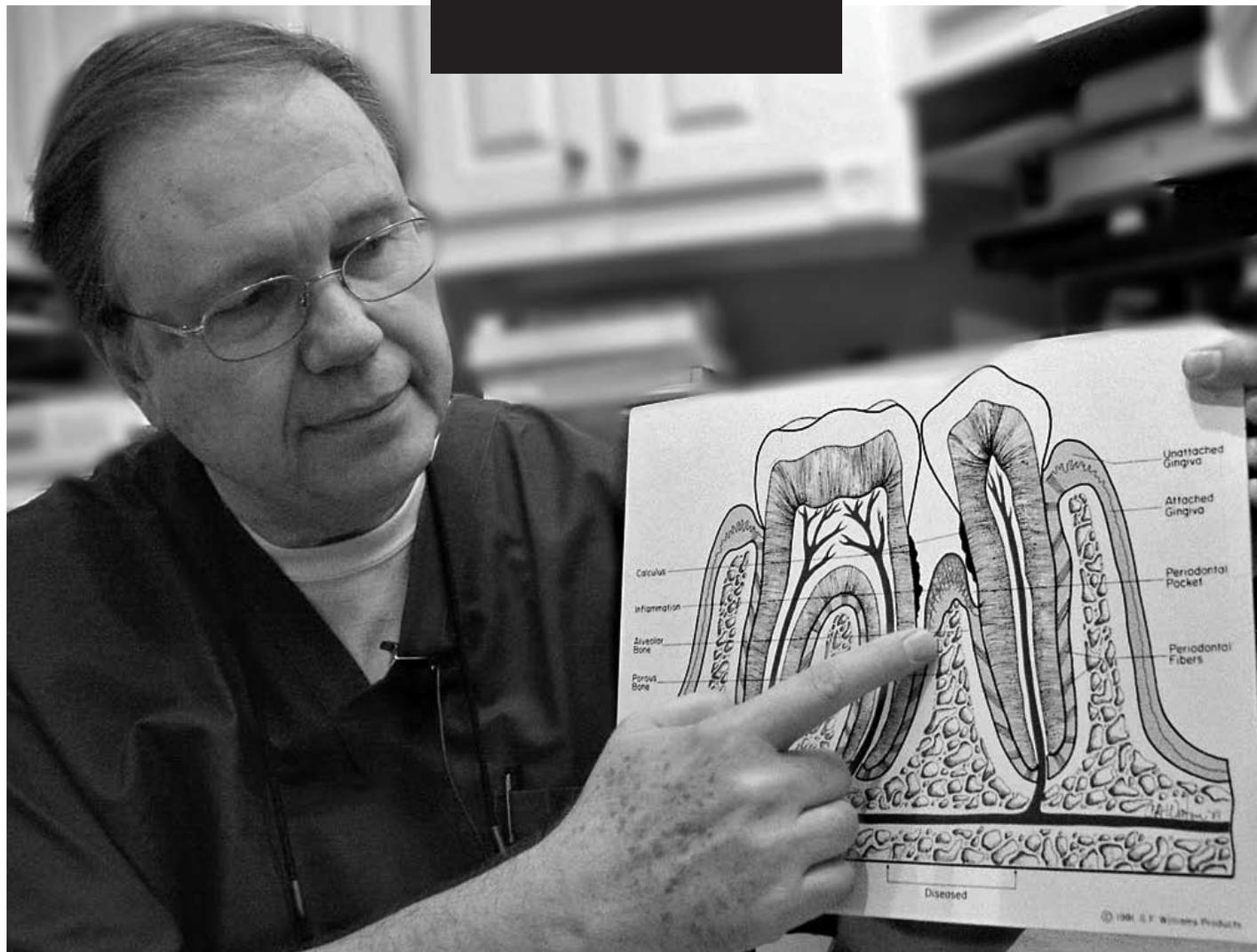
The statement adds, “Pregnant women and persons who may have a health condition that makes them more sensitive to mercury exposure, including individuals with existing high levels of mercury bio-burden, should not avoid seeking dental care, but should discuss options with their health practitioner.”

Under the settlement, the FDA is required to issue a definitive statement about the safety of mercury amalgam fillings this coming July.

There are, Dr. Willock notes, excellent options to the use of amalgam dental fillings. “We now have superior materials to place in teeth, such as composite resins and ceramics which bond to the tooth and seal it much better. Some people are more sensitive than others to the toxic effects of mercury leakage. Many people have a genetic predisposition for sensitivity to mercury and other heavy metals.”

In sum, Dr. Willock makes a strong case that our teeth can be both healthy and beautiful as the years pass. A talented cosmetic dentist, he adds “Certainly you’re never too old to express your personality with a beautiful new smile,” with a smile of his own. *h&h*

Caring for Aging Teeth



Dr. Willock is always pleased to share information with patients about the structure of the tooth, including areas where special care is necessary to avoid difficult dental problems.

For more information about Dr. Willock’s work, contact:
C. MICHAEL WILLOCK, DDS
861 Willow Drive
Chapel Hill, NC 27514
Telephone: (919) 942-2154
www.docsmile.net
A holistic approach to oral health and wellness