Natural remedies for a healthy mouth

We'll have to operate, but we may yet save some of your teeth.” That was the dentist’s final opinion.

Raj Singh, 53, of Mississauga, Ont., had serious gum disease brought on, in his words, by a “history of poor oral hygiene, a lifetime of late-night sweets and decades of smoking.” His gums were painful and bleeding, and his teeth wiggled in their sockets.

So Singh visited a naturopathic physician who recommended coenzyme Q₁₀ daily to stabilize the gum tissue and a few basic lifestyle changes. These measures slowed the degeneration, which provided some hope.

On the advice of a herbalist, Singh also began a regimen of nightly gum packs made from herbs rolled in gauze, which he tucked into the corners of his mouth. A combination of turmeric, aloe, willow bark, vitamin E and powdered alum did the trick. He rapidly noted a “significant turnaround,” and by the four-month mark was out of crisis. Now, five years later, Singh still has no significant periodontal disease, just a couple of spots, which is quite normal for a man his age.

Dental care

Teeth are designed to last a lifetime. Yet an increasing percentage of Canadians wear dentures. According to the dental profession, between 80 and 90 per cent of our population has some form of observable gum disease.

Taken together, tooth cavities (caries) and gum (periodontal) disease, create a painful condition that causes tooth loss and is expensive to correct. Canadians spend more than $4 billion a year to treat and slow the degeneration of their dental health.

If you’re overstressed and generally unhealthy, your immune system will be suppressed and dental caries, which are caused by bacteria, will flourish. If your mouth is unhealthy, it overloads your health constantly, lowering your resistance to all disease.

A clean mouth is a healthy mouth. As the saying goes, “clean only the teeth you want to keep.” In addition to conventional care, the main way to keep your mouth clean is to eat a whole-foods diet free of refined sugar. The bacteria that cause dental caries (Streptococcus mutans) thrive on sugar.

General mouth care

Most natural healers recommend using warming, astringent, connective-tissue-healing herbs to enhance and maintain oral health. These herbs can be used as a rinse or applied as packs (a pinch of powder, wetted to a mush with a liquid, such as water or vitamin
E, and tucked next to the teeth). Rinses are made by preparing a herb as tea in the usual way, or by simply stirring herb powder into water. Hold the rinse in the mouth for up to several minutes, gargle and spit out.

Michael Tierra, in *Planetary Herbology* (Lotus, 1988), suggests that a daily mouthwash made from chaparral will prevent dental caries. Ayurvedic herbalist Melanie Sachs, in *Ayurvedic Beauty Care* (Lotus, 1994), suggests a gum massage with a mixture containing five parts alum powder, two parts rock salt powder, three parts black pepper powder and one part turmeric root powder.

In *The Traditional Healers Handbook* (Healing Arts, 1988), Hakim Chirishi suggests a gum pack made from rose petal, oak leaf and carob powder.

Bilberry fruit and hawthorn berry stabilize collagen, strengthening the gum tissue. Licorice root, also sold in many health food stores, is a gem for the mouth: It promotes anti-cavity action, reduces plaque and has an antibacterial effect.

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The tooth sockets are joints, and the teeth are essentially bones. Herbs that treat the skeleton and the joints when taken internally are good bets for long-term tooth health. Standouts include yellow dock root, alfalfa leaf, cinnamon bark and turmeric root.

**Periodontal disease**

Ida Marconi of Calgary, Alta., knows the misery of gum disease. At 45, she was making monthly pilgrimages to the periodontist to save her sore, bleeding gums. After 15 years, enough was enough, and she committed to trying herbal medicine. Turmeric capsules, goldenseal rinse and nightly packs of a paste containing turmeric powder, licorice root and vitamin E solved her problem. She began the program only two weeks before one of her regular periodontal appointments, and her dentist said her gums were in the “best condition ever.”

Periodontal disease (PD) is a long-term, low-grade bacterial infection of the gums, bone and ligaments that support the teeth and anchor them in the jaw. The bacteria are normal inhabitants of the mouth, but when allowed to overgrow, they form plaque and tartar, and produce toxins that provoke the body’s immune response. The disease can eventually destroy the supporting structures of the teeth, which eventually leads to tooth loss.

PD occurs at any age. More than half of those over 18 have some form of the disease. After age 35, 75 percent of all people are affected. PD is a major cause of bad breath in Canadians and is clearly the leading cause of tooth loss.

Local gum treatment can dramatically reverse PD. Turmeric mouth packs work especially well. As well, there are herbal mouthwashes for PD available. A preliminary study showed that, used twice a day, one herbal rinse reduced plaque by 50 percent, decreased bleeding and reduced gum pockets by one to two millimetres. One formula contains extracts of echinacea, goldenseal, calendula, aloe, bloodroot and grapefruit seed. Similarly, holistic dentists treat PD using tinctures of echinacea, eucalyptus and myrrh as washes, or with gum massage using the oil of eucalyptus.

**Mouth sores**

Commonly called “canker sores,” these mouth ulcers can be supremely painful and are virtually always linked to food allergies and nutritional deficiencies, particularly in iron, vitamin B12 and folic acid. Use high oral doses of acidophilus and an acidophilus mouth rinse.

A recent study showed good results using a chamomile mouthwash in treating mouth ulcers caused by chemotherapy. Other helpful rinses include alum and cinchona bark. Some herbalists suggest applying the powder of myrrh gum directly to the ulcer.

Probably the most outstanding herbal remedy for mouth sores is licorice root, a potent anti-inflammatory and tissue healer. Put a pinch of powder on the sore, or suck on a lozenge made from DGL (deglycerrhizinated licorice) lozenges.

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