



health

I am reclining on a chicly coral-colored leather massage chair in the Park Avenue offices of Gerald Curatola, D.D.S., a place where pain, the hallmark of the oral-hygiene brigade, seems like a distant relic of the twentieth century. Regarding a grossly amplified image of my all-too-imperfect teeth on a video monitor, I feel as I imagine Katie Couric must have during her nationally televised colonoscopy: all soft pink exposed tissue and emotional vulnerability.

Curatola, a tanned, jovial man who tends to the smiles of the rich and famous (he has sung onstage with patient Billy Joel and himself resembles a midlife Tony Bennett), noted that my entire set is . . . not yellow, exactly, but definitely yellowish—more like the piano keys on an oft-tickled Steinway than “Chiclet teeth,” as American Dental Association adviser Sally Cram, D.D.S., calls today’s ideal. This thanks to widely available bleaching treatments, from Curatola’s pricey antioxidant-replacing regimen to the over-the-counter strips tactfully slipped to me by my mother-in-law.

Artificial whitener has officially joined the syringe of Botox in the antiaging arsenal; unlike fine lines, however, deteriorating teeth can be a powerful harbinger of problems in the rest of the body. “The emphasis is disturbing,” Cram says later on the phone from her D.C. office. “I see a lot of people who have decay and serious periodontal disease, but their focus is ‘I want to have white teeth.’” Not only can discolored and damaged teeth be signs of other illnesses—bulimia, diabetes, osteoporosis—but oral bacteria is an expressway to systemic

WHITE LIES

In the quest for sparkling teeth, Alexandra Jacobs wonders if we’re covering up signs of more menacing health problems.

inflammation and potential heart disease. “The mouth,” Cram says, “is the window to your overall health.”

Even successful cosmetic dentists like Curatola are increasingly concerned that our pursuit of the Ultimate Smile might be eliding critical oral-health issues; essentially, that we can’t see the forest through the veneers. “Giving people a beautiful smile when they have gum disease”—of which more than 80 percent of adults have some form—“is like reshingling the house while termites are destroying the foundation.”

Cram prefers a fashion metaphor. “Think of your gum as a little turtleneck collar around the tooth,” she says. “Basically, if you don’t get the bacteria out within two to three days, that nice turtleneck collar becomes like a loose cowl neck, opening a pathway for bacteria to get into the jawbone and start eating away.”

But is a little mild gingivitis, indicated by red rings such as those glimpsed around my gums, really such a terrible

RED ALERT

GINGIVITIS HAS BEEN LINKED TO ILLNESSES SUCH AS HEART DISEASE AND DIABETES. LEFT: A DETAIL FROM JOE TILSON’S *TRANSPARENCY, THE FIVE SENSES: TASTE*.

thing? Curatola tells me it can trigger the liver to release sinister-sounding C-reactive proteins, which clog artery linings, increasing the risk of cardiovascular disease. Left unchecked, gingivitis can turn into periodontitis—erosion of tissue surrounding the teeth—and lead to a chronic total-body inflammation associated with other conditions such as Alzheimer’s and even certain types of cancer.

In the fight against oral malady, dentists are venturing far beyond the medieval-looking metal tools used to scrape tartar, with devices like the Florida Probe, which measures gum looseness, and lasers for root canals. Even our drool is coming under scrutiny. A spit test for HIV is already FDA-approved, and scientists predict that dentists will soon be able to screen patients for other ailments. “We can look at the saliva of healthy people and compare it with that from people with osteoporosis or cancer. If you look at enough of these individuals, a disease ‘signature’ will begin to emerge—a fingerprint, if you will,” says David Wong, D.D.S., associate dean of research at the UCLA School of Dentistry. “Between that and a spinal tap? The answer is clear.”

But alas, it seems that no technological advancement will replace the tedious ritual of standing in front of the bathroom mirror, sawing away. “You have to physically get in there, brushing twice a day and flossing,” Cram says. “There is no substitute for good old-fashioned elbow grease.”

As for whitening: “It can possibly be damaging to your gums and teeth, caustic to the tissue, pitting and decalcifying,” she says. “Bleach is bleach,” adds Manhattan prosthodontist Nargiz Schmidt, D.D.S. Inevitably you’re eating some of it, and the verdict is still out on how that might affect, say, the esophagus. Until long-term studies have been completed, she recommends limiting home treatments to once every six months, and warns that benefits will diminish as teeth’s underlying (yellowish) dentin is exposed with age.

On the bright side, if vanity is driving us to dentists’ offices more often, perhaps we are lucky that so many are putting themselves, as Curatola put it (with a twinkling smile, naturally), “on the front line of leading a longer, healthier life.” □