

## Acid Reflux: Dentist May Detect First Signs

*Enamel loss may indicate disease*

A painful burning sensation radiating from inside the chest is often symptomatic of heartburn. Persistent symptoms, more than twice weekly, may be a sign of Gastroesophageal Reflux Disease, or GERD. Not everyone with GERD suffers from heartburn. In fact, you may have GERD and not even know it.

Commonly called acid reflux, GERD is caused when the esophageal sphincter, which separates the stomach from the esophagus, allows acid to seep out of the stomach. This acid often causes heartburn, but not always. In the absence of heartburn symptoms, sometimes the first indication that an individual suffers from GERD is the erosion of the hard enamel surface covering the back teeth and molars.

“Stomach acid can eat away at the enamel on your teeth,” said Shannon Mills, DDS, Vice President, Professional Relations and Science, Northeast Delta Dental. “Your dentist may be the first to notice symptoms of the disease when he or she detects enamel loss.”

If detected, your dentist may refer you to a specialist, who may prescribe treatment or recommend lifestyle changes, such as avoiding acidic foods.

Left untreated, GERD can do long-term damage to your body. Loss of enamel is permanent; and, if left unchecked, may lead to the rapid decay of affected teeth. Prolonged exposure to stomach acid can irritate and inflame your esophagus and may even lead to esophageal cancer.<sup>1</sup>



That’s just one of the many reasons why getting a regular oral exam from a dentist is so important. Your dentist may find early symptoms of a potentially serious problem such as GERD. In fact, more than 90 percent of systemic diseases have manifestations that may be detected during an oral exam.<sup>2</sup> This includes diabetes, leukemia, cancer, heart disease, kidney disease, and stroke.

“Dental care is an important part of overall health care,” said Mills. “A growing body of evidence shows that quality oral health care can improve overall health.”

<sup>1</sup>American Cancer Society “Suffering from Heartburn? Severe Heartburn Could Be Esophageal Cancer Risk Factor.”

<sup>2</sup>Academy of General Dentistry’s *Know Your Teeth*, October 2008.

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## New Services May Help Millions Manage Dental Anxiety

Millions of Americans dread visiting the dentist. In fact, an estimated 30–to–40 million<sup>1</sup> avoid going to the dentist because of anxiety or fear. Delta Dental is raising awareness about dental phobia, a condition that affects many Americans.

“Avoiding the dentist because of fear or phobia may cause an individual’s minor untreated dental problems to develop into severe oral health conditions and, in rare cases, even death,” says Max Anderson, DDS, a national oral health advisor for Delta Dental Plans Association. “It is unfortunate that these individuals may not be receiving the dental care they need. Regular dental cleanings, exams, x-rays, and dental treatment services recommended by your dentist are vital to good oral health.”

There are many reasons why people develop dental phobia. The most common cause is a traumatic dental experience. Children are also often influenced by their parents’ fears and squeamish attitudes towards dental treatment. Dental phobia may involve fear of dentists, dental procedures, needles, or situations that remind the sufferer of a phobic situation. The dentist’s drill is often a major factor in these fears.

“People should share their concerns with their dentist or dental hygienist,” says Anderson. “The dental team will determine ways to make the exam more comfortable.”

If your dentist does not take your fear seriously, you may need to find a dentist who better understands dental phobia. There are ways to work with a dentist to reduce the anxiety.



For instance, ask your dentist to explain what is happening during every stage of the exam. Another strategy is to establish a hand signal to let the dentist know when to take a break.

Increasingly, more dental offices offer services that help patients manage their anxiety, including:

- Relaxation techniques – such as breathing exercises
- Virtual reality eyewear
- Headsets with music or calming nature sounds

Other options for extreme dental anxiety and pain reduction include forms of sedation via medications that are administered intravenously, orally, or through inhalation. Since there are risks associated with these various approaches to sedation and anesthesia, talk to your dentist about any special state permit or training program governing these services, and discuss which therapy is right for you.

<sup>1</sup>Krochak, Dr. Michael. “What is Dental Phobia?” *DentalFear.net* 2008

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