

Keeping gums healthy can help you avoid pancreatic cancer

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A new study finds that along with smoking, obesity and diabetes, periodontal disease increases a person's risk of developing pancreatic cancer.

Cancer of the pancreas, an insulin-secreting gland that is part of the digestive system, is the fourth-leading cause of cancer death in the United States. It is extremely difficult to treat and little is known about what causes it.

Tumors of the pancreas are diagnosed in 30,000 Americans each year, and few survive more than five years after diagnosis.

"Our study provides the first strong evidence that periodontal disease may increase the

risk of pancreatic cancer," said Dominique Michaud, an assistant professor of epidemiology at the Harvard School of Public Health and lead author of the study, published today in the *Journal of the National Cancer Institute*.

"This finding is of significance as it may provide some new insights into the mechanism of this highly fatal disease," added Michaud, whose work has also involved unsuccessful efforts to find dietary clues to pancreatic cancer.

Periodontal disease is caused by bacterial infections and inflammation of the gums that over time cause loss of the bone that supports the teeth and eventual tooth loss. Two previous studies found a link

between tooth loss and pancreatic cancer, but one consisted of all smokers, and the other did not factor in smoking in the analysis, making it hard to draw firm conclusions.

For the new study, Michaud and other researchers at Harvard and the Dana Farber Cancer Institute took data from a long-term study of more than 51,000 American men working in the health professions. The men responded to questionnaires about their lifestyle and health every two years between 1986 and 2002.

After analyzing the responses, the researchers found there had been 216 cases of pancreatic cancer among the men during that time, and of those men, 67 also reported having periodontal disease.