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So sometimes when my beloved USC football Trojans lose on a “Hail Mary” at the end of a game they really should have won like 30-minutes or so earlier, I take the time to just sit back and reflect. Usually, the process goes something like this, “What do I really know?”

There are three ways to answer the football-induced question and who knew the behavior of 20-year old kids during fall weekends could trigger serious soul searching?

Okay, so I know what I really know. My name is Jack and I’m a dentist. I also know what I don’t know (Details of the Theory of Relativity, the Vietnamese language, and why USC ever hired Coach Lane Kiffin...among many others.) But “What do I really know?” is like one grain of sand to Outer Mongolia compared to “What I don’t know I don’t know.” I’m kind of a competitive guy so I bet I can match-up my ignorant zone with the best of ‘em because it’s all part of being human. Intelligence has nothing to do with “what you don’t know you don’t know”. Bet you didn’t know Albert Einstein actually married his maternal first cousin...and now we’re already making progress.

My job here is sharing what I really know about oral health. 50% of the U.S. doesn’t see a dentist on a regular basis and what you don’t know you

don’t know about oral health can steal away years and quality of life. Here are a few questions and answers that might make a difference.

Q. Is gum disease really contagious?

Periodontal disease affects the soft and hard tissues that support the dentition; it’s essentially a bacterial infection. The bacterial infection is transmissible within the mouth and between individuals. When we diagnose a patient with periodontitis, it’s very important that we also examine the spouse or partner (it’s almost a sure thing they’ll receive a similar diagnosis.)

Research has shown a relationship between periodontal disease and heart disease, diabetes, lung disease, pancreatic cancer, and low weight premature births among other systemic connections. Unmanaged, periodontal disease can decrease life expectancy by some seven years.

The tragedy is periodontal disease can be diagnosed painlessly by the numbers. The disease

isn’t cured, but it can be monitored and managed. If your gums bleed or you have bad breath, you have a bacterial infection you probably share with your family.

Q. What about tooth decay; is tooth decay contagious too?

Bacteria are also part of the tooth decay process. In fact, a majority of teenagers with good oral health and no cavities are diagnosed with gingivitis and an average of three sites of tooth decay within six months of acquiring a driver’s license. Just like with periodontal disease, tooth decay is transmissible...and social.

An acidic, sugary oral environment is an ideal condition for Strep mutans bacteria to eat away enamel the way termites could have taken out George Washington’s denture. It doesn’t help that teenagers, these days, actually drink more calories than they eat. And yeah, it’s true; if you drop one of your extracted wisdom teeth into a bottle of Coca Cola before you go to sleep at night, it will be gone by morning.

Tooth decay is the leading cause of tooth loss in the U.S. By age 65, 25% of Americans have no teeth; another 25% have retained less than half.

The three fastest growing diseases in the U.S. are diabetes, obesity...and tooth decay; and they’re all related.

Q. Can going to the dentist save your life?

This is an easy one: “Yes.” In the U.S., one person per hour dies of oral cancer. 25% of those diagnosed with oral cancer do not smoke, use chewing tobacco, or drink heavily. An oral cancer exam is painless and so is screening with a brush biopsy.

The fastest growing oral cancer demographic is 18-22 year-old women; these cancers are related to HPV infections occurring in the back of the throat and base of the tongue and tonsils.

Obstructive Sleep Apnea (OSA) impacts 20-million Americans and unmanaged, can reduce life expectancy by some 8-years. Only about 20% of primary care physicians screen for OSA, a service your dentist can provide. Hopefully, this Q&A helped some in reducing what you didn’t know you didn’t know about oral health.

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