



## **Dentists May See First Signs of Acid Reflux**

*Enamel loss may indicate disease in those lacking symptoms*

Everyone knows that painful burning sensation radiating from inside the chest—heartburn. Persistent symptoms, more than twice weekly, may be a sign of Gastroesophageal Reflux Disease, or GERD. But not everyone with GERD suffers from heartburn. In fact, you may have GERD and not even know it.

Commonly called acid reflux, the condition is caused when the esophageal sphincter, which separates the stomach from the esophagus, allows acid to seep out of the stomach. Many times this acid 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 or molars.

“Stomach acid can eat away at the enamel on your teeth,” said Katina Morelli, DDS, dental director for Delta Dental of Illinois. “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. And prolonged exposure to stomach acid can irritate and inflame your esophagus and may even lead to esophageal cancer.<sup>1</sup>

That’s 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 oral manifestations that may be detected during an oral exam.<sup>2</sup> That includes diabetes, leukemia, cancer, heart disease, kidney disease and stroke.

“Dental care is an important part of overall health care,” said Morelli. “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” [http://www.cancer.org/docroot/NWS/content/NWS\\_1\\_1x\\_Suffering\\_from\\_Heartburn\\_.asp](http://www.cancer.org/docroot/NWS/content/NWS_1_1x_Suffering_from_Heartburn_.asp).

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