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Vital Signs

Quick news about health

Alzheimer's disease

Poor dental health signals higher risk

Missing teeth and gum disease at an early age may be linked to an increased risk of Alzheimer's disease, researchers have found, bolstering the increasingly strong connection between early exposure to chronic inflammation and the degenerative brain disorder.

The study, among the findings presented last month at the first Alzheimer's Association International Conference on Prevention of Dementia, examined lifestyle factors of more than 100 pairs of identical twins, in which one twin had dementia and one didn't.

Twins who had severe periodontal disease before age 35 had a fivefold increase in risk of developing Alzheimer's, the research found.

Lead author Margaret Gatz, a psychology professor at the University of Southern California, cautioned that the results don't mean that extra flossing will reduce risk of Alzheimer's.

Instead, periodontal disease may be a marker for chronic exposure to disease that provokes an inflammatory response. Chronic inflammation can damage tissue, including the brain, which may contribute to the development of the disease.

"I would think of the periodontal disease as a signpost, not a cause," Gatz said.