The Mouth-Body Connection: How Oral Health Drives Whole-Body Disease with Dr. Tom Larkin Transcript

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Oral Health and Bleeding Gums

At its most basic level, your gums can't bleed, okay? So when does the patient have to be concerned? Are your gums bleeding at home, right? If you brush your teeth and spit into the sink and you see blood, there's a problem.

Because what that tells me is that once your gums bleed, there's an open communication between your mouth and your circulatory system. And if you have pathogens, they're in circulation at remote sites.

And as you were saying, any of the inflammatory-based, the big ones being heart disease, diabetes, about dimension, then we can get into other cancer risk with some pathogens, but gums can't bleed.

This is Doctor Talks, real talk from real doctors on the issues that matter to you most. Hi, this is Dr. Monica Harigie. Welcome back to the Truly Healthy MD podcast.

Hello to our listeners. Have you ever wondered what your oral health has to do with the health of the rest of your body? This is something I talk to my patients a lot.

I'm not a dentist. I'm an internist with functional medicine training. And I do tell my patients about the big role that our mouth help, especially our oral microbiome has to do with the rest of the health and the rest of our body.

And here to talk to us about this today is Dr. Tom Larkins. So I have a very honored to have you here. Thank you, Dr. Larkins. Thank you so much. It's an honor to be here.

So tell us about yourself, Dr. Larkins. So I'm, I find myself in a, in a niche of prevention. Okay. And once again, it's not a very, it's a, it's a small area in dentistry.

Most people still practice reactive care, which you know, you're familiar with in medicine. you know, people come in with disease and you address the disease.

Um, I was very fortunate decades ago to learn from one of the people that really set the, in all of the protocols in prevention in dentistry. His name was Paul Kyes.

Introducing the Podcast and Oral-Systemic Health

And so now I teach and coach dentists about the oral microbiome, how to maintain it and all of the implications, because, you know, we now know that the health of the mouth affects the body.

When I first started doing prevention 30 years ago, I just was doing it strictly for gum disease and for cavities. I really didn't have knowledge. If you like this discussion, please hit the subscribe button and consider leaving us a review.

It really helps people find us and we truly appreciate your support. But it's so much more than that. That's true. We talk a lot about gut health and integrated functional medicine, but gut health starts in the mouth.

It's part of the gut. And definitely that preventative approach is very important since We don't want to wait until there's a problem. If we can prevent it, that's amazing.

What's this preventative approach that you teach? So, you know, the afternoon bird is early diagnosis, right? Early diagnosis and prevention. So my wheelhouse in particular is the use of a microscope, the dental hygienist, I trained

dental hygienist, how to use a microscope chair side to look at the oral microbiome and to share their findings with the patient on a big screen TV.

I have a very special microscope that's like a developed under my direction. And it just fits by the chair side.

Preventive Dentistry and Oral Microbiome Testing

We take a sample of the gum under the gum line and put it up on the, the tv and the patient goes whoa i had no idea what was in my mouth because they see the bacteria for the first time and it it just accelerates the entire conversation about you know that that the coating on your teeth is alive all right and and this whole word dysbiosis which you're extremely familiar with in gut health has never really been used in dentistry very much right yeah beginning to be used now okay so i teach people how to recognize dysbiosis And then depending on the patient and depending on the circumstance, we can have a further test on salivary diagnostics, whether it's a PCR or a genomic test where we want to, because the microscope doesn't tell us, you know, the exact pathogens or the pathogen load, but we decide whether we want to go a little bit further from that.

Excellent. So what types of problems can you prevent when you catch this dysbiosis early and make sure that it's treated? Yeah. So two of the most infectious diseases on the planet are, you know, gum disease and dental caries, cavities, you know, world health organization.

And it hasn't changed in decades. I mean, we still have the problem. It's pretty much rooted in dietary based, refines carbohydrates are, are the driver of, you know, the, one of the things we have in common is that, you know, insulin resistance is probably a big thing in your, in your world.

And the same things that drive that are the same things that drive dental disease. So we just get, it's, you know, it's the very basics. It's the fundamentals teaching patients about that.

And then what do we do about it? What, what can they do at home and what can we do professionally? So professionally, some of the things that I teach are laser therapy.

Okay. And these are a little bit more advanced things. So we have the diagnosis and then we have the treatment options, which are. lasers, prebiotics, probiotics, and what's called air polishing, where we use a new technique for cleaning the teeth.

It's kind of a slurry, a medicated slurry that you can remove the biofilm with. So yeah, these are some of the newer things in dentistry. Fatigue, brain fog, mood swings, weight gain.

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That's amazing, amazing. Yeah, for sure. And we do know that there's a lot of health issues that are rooted in dental health. We do know that a lot of inflammatory problems that we see in the rest of the body, if we find the root cause in the mouth, we can definitely treat that.

Is that something that you've seen in your clinical practice? Yep. So the three things, the three things that I focus on are airway. Okay. Any airway disturbances are inflammatory based, really easy for the dentist to screen if they're trained properly.

And we're not talking about a sleep study. We're just talking about a basic screening, right? So that they could, like, let's say that you and I had a professional relationship.

So the things that I'm going to provide for you are sleep screening. I need a CT scan. I need an oral CT scan, not a

traditional x-ray, because I'm looking for root canals that might have residual infection.

Those are, you know, low grade driving anti-inflammatory things.

Cavities, Gum Disease, and Treatment Options

and then a gum disease. So whether we use the microscope or a salivary test, those are the three things that a functional medicine doc needs in order to kind of round out your diagnosis.

Yeah, for sure, for sure. And then when patients come back to me, that definitely helps in the treatment of everything else. You're talking about cardiovascular disease, neuropsychiatric problems, rheumatologic problems, all of that has roots in oral and the rest of gut health.

So it's just, It's so important to address this. At its most basic level, your gums can't bleed. OK, so when does the patient have to be concerned? Are your gums bleeding at home, right?

If you brush your teeth and spit into the sink and you see blood, there's a problem. Because what that tells me is that once your gums bleed, there's an open communication between your mouth and your circulatory system.

And if you have pathogens, they're in circulation at remote sites. And as you were saying, any of the inflammatory-based The big ones being heart disease, diabetes, dementia, and then we can get into other, you know, cancer risk with some pathogens, but gums can't bleed.

All right. That's simple. Absolutely. Absolutely. And so you are mentioning both prebiotics and probiotics regarding the oral flora. This might be a completely new topic for our listeners.

Most of us have heard about these for the the intestine, right? We know about some lactobacilli and some prebiotic fibers. Tell us more about what the oral microbiome needs as far as prebiotics and probiotics.

Yeah, two really, really interesting things. It's a really interesting, it's an emerging topic. Yeah, absolutely. Probiotics, my familiarity is they're used in situations of dental decay.

And so whenever we undergo treatment and we use antimicrobials to alter the microbiome, What a probiotic does, because these are synthetic forms of strep, the particular brand that I'm thinking about, they go in at the completion of treatment, and they act like a placeholder, and they keep pathogens from coming in.

So in a simplistic fashion, they're a part of a treatment protocol. We treat the patient with a high level of decay, and we address the problems with the pH and all the things in the oral microbiome, and then come in with a probiotic to support that.

Prebiotics are new, okay? And I have an annual conference on innovation. And I think it's three years ago, Dr. Emily Stein, who's a PhD microbiologist from Stanford, has come out with a prebiotic and it's completely novel.

And it's really, it has a lot of potential. It's still in the phases. I mean, it's being used, but a lot of research around it. And what it does is it puts the bacteria in your mouth on a keto diet, but it, and so it's, it's a non pharmaceutical.

And what she did was she developed a way to kind of break that metabolic connection.

Airway, Root Canal Infection, and Diagnostic Screening

So just by taking a lozenge after you eat it, it disrupts. So as she taught me is that the, the byproducts of sugar metabolism. the pathogens are downstream.

And if you can break that cycle, then you can push the pathogens out. So, you know, basically what the situation is in the mouth, as is in the gut, you have commensals, which are your friendly bacteria, and you have pathogens.

And there's this constant back and forth struggle, right? And when the pathogens predominate, you have dysbiosis, And when everything is kind of calm, then that's a more symbiotic situation.

So a prebiotic actually can change that without any biofilm disruption, no brushing the teeth, no rinsing. It's actually doing it in absence of that. So, you know, early usage of this and what has me excited about prebiotics is a case like in a nursing home, but in places where people have very limited ability to have good oral care.

Um, this product can be placed in, in a water bottle and it can, you can drink it. And so anyway, those are, those are some of the newer technologies that are out there.

Are they also available for children? Uh, yes. Yeah, for sure. So we screen, we screen kids. And as you know, the oral microbiome in my training, I show that the oral microbiome is familiar, meaning if you sample.

people in a family, many times it's identical, right? This is a transmissible, it's a transmissible situation. So kids and parents can have identical oral microbiomes for sure.

So kids should, it's very easy to take the test. And once again, we test the kids pretty early on because sometimes you'll see stuff there that surprises you.

That's amazing. I heard you come, you came up with this thing called the Larkin protocol. Can you tell us what that is? So the Larkin protocol is basically, and it's evolved over time.

It started out with the microscope. And so the slogan is test, teach, treat, repeat. So the testing involves the microscope and then salivary testing if needed.

Treating is essentially three things. It's the, using the laser, using the air polishing and ozone water. Okay. And aqueous ozone is pretty new. The company that has, this is probably three or four years ago, they began to present at my conference.

Um, and it's a product that you can get it out of the tap. So I don't want to get into a deep dive in an ozone, but anyway, ozone water is a really, I just call it holistic antimicrobial because there's no chemicals involved in it.

Okay. And it kills everything. You know, I mean, it kills bacteria, viruses, pathogens. And that's very safe, right? So it can be used in a water pick.

There's a new water pick that has ozone capability.

Why Bleeding Gums Signal Systemic Risk

So that's on the treatment. No, I'm sorry, test teach. The second part is teaching. I'm sorry, I skipped a spot. The teacher is using our findings, whether it's testing or the microscope, to teach the patient, because we want our patients to kind of own their condition.

And you know that as one of the principles of functional medicine, you know, you're more of a, of a coach and you're, you're, you're alongside your patient helping on their health journey.

You're not talking down to them as the traditional, you know, Hey, I've got bad news. You've got this, right? So it's a different relationship. So we take the time to teach them.

And then the treatment and then the repeat is what probably you would be familiar with the term precision medicine, meaning Every patient's different.

Every patient responds differently. So when it comes time for me to tell you when you come in for your next cleaning, it's going to be based on your microbiome stability.

Okay. So the microscope test just takes a minute and we don't charge for it because it's an inexpensive test. And so I'm going to choose your next cleaning interval.

depending on how stable. So it might be three months, four months, five months, six months. So it's not, it's not, you go to the dentist twice a year, right?

Which is kind of the standard in the, in the precision medicine or precision dentistry, every patient's different. And it depends on what I need to do to keep you stable.

And as you know, the microbiome is it's, it's dynamic. Okay. You never cure, whether it's the gut or the mouth, there's never a cure because it changes tomorrow.

Based on your environment, based on your immunity, based on your relationship, you could get a new partner and get infected with a completely new oral microbiome.

And then you have a whole new challenge. So it's complex. Very complex. Yeah. And it seems like this is very low hanging fruit for a lot of people. Just thinking about people out there, they know about, they need to eat, right?

Prebiotics, Probiotics, and Oral Dysbiosis

They know they need to exercise and they know they need to watch their sleep hygiene. But sometimes to me, it's, it's really amazing how many people haven't taken the steps to take care of their oral health, their oral microbiome.

So what would the first step for somebody out there that's listening to this be? Yeah. So, so basically, you know, it's kind of difficult, but you're looking for a biological dentist or a holistic dentist.

So I have a. a practice startup that I did with a recent graduate about five years ago, who is a holistic dentist. And, you know, you come in as a new patient, it's two and a half hours.

Okay. I mean, it's a comprehensive to make sure that all of these boxes are ticked. Here's the bad news. The number of dentists that are out there that are doing this is very small.

And the number of people looking for this type of dentist far exceeds the number of dentists who are trained. So, you know, I'm starting this like 15 years ago, and I can tell you right now, You know, my schedule is pretty overwhelmed with people wanting to know it today.

This is very proactive. Healthcare is very topical. So my going to the A4M meeting in November was my first time. And that was where I've kind of, I wanted to look at the functional medicine side of it.

And I wanted to see how dentistry was represented. And it didn't surprise me. The dentistry is very poorly represented in that whole group. And that's, that was kind of part of my motivation of wanting not only to have my own podcast, but to be on podcasts so I can bring these more advanced conversations to you because it's helpful.

It's helpful in your daily work and more dentists need to get on board with this for sure. Yeah. I love having these conversations. I love spreading the word about these things because, um, there's just, it's just not talked about enough.

And if you're not going to hear here, we're going to hear it about, so it's, it's really, really, really important. And so I know you talk a lot about being proactive and proactive oral wellness.

Tell me more about that. Yeah. So basically it's, it's, you know, the whole trend today, the trend is people, for instance, if you go online and you look at the number of tests that you can get a medical testing that you can get on your own, you know, without a prescription, right?

So the trend is in functional health and some of these coaching sites and these influencers, so to speak, is people

want to take You know they want to take their health care into their own hands, and so they're they're demanding things right and they're asking a lot of questions so so to be proactive is.

when you go to a dentist, you know, I want to know this is a different model. This is a risk assessment model, meaning what is my risk for gum disease?

What is my risk for, for dental decay? And it's not the old model, which is, you know, the dentist kind of looks at you and say, well, you kind of look okay.

Or, you know, I'm guessing, no, now we have, we have AI, we have X-rays that are, that are read by AI very accurately, very objectively, you know, because, Everybody knows that if you go to 10 different dentists, you're going to get 10 different opinions.

The Larkin Protocol and Precision Dentistry

You know, one dentist may say you have no cavities and one may say you have 10. And unfortunately, the one that told you you had 10, people would say, oh, that, that was too aggressive.

That could have been the most conservative one because using AI, he may have seen just an early stage of decalcification and, and made a notation of it.

And now we have, and this is all emerging right as we speak for the very first time we have regenerative products. Okay. Not amazing arresting decay regenerating decay.

And it's all, you know, without showing the x-rays. I could, I could show you cavitations that are healed. Okay. Early, early. decalcifications that are completely healed, there's two different technologies.

They're called bio-restoratives, okay? So it's an exciting time to be a dentist because, you know, the concept of hanging onto your teeth for the rest of your life, I just don't know why that's such a, you know, they're just way too many implants, way, way too many implants are being pushed on people.

You know, that's being looked upon as a solution. It's not a solution. And so, so for your audience to know, if you lose a tooth because of gum disease, you can definitely lose an implant because of gum disease, because the dentist has never addressed root cause.

Okay. And that's happening. That's happening. So yeah, I talk about all that stuff. That is, that's, that's really cool. And I love all the, you know, the message of hope that we're giving to people that might be out there and listening and being like, Oh, there is regenerative dentistry.

That is, that's, that's really, really amazing. Yeah, for sure. So as far as your, what you teach, is this mostly geared towards professionals? Do you have any courses for the public?

No. So it's, it's basically, you know, my work in teaching professional professionals, you know, because it, because this is, you know, this is outside of university.

It's just like, you know, the A4M, you know, a lot of that stuff is, is entrepreneurial based or it's cutting edge. The people that come to my conference, you know, this is not the stuff that's in the school.

The school will find out about it 20 years from now. Right. And so, no, I'm super busy teaching and I teach worldwide. I have, I have a huge following in Australia.

And that was kind of a coincidence because I started teaching over there during COVID, during the lockdown. And so I have learning platforms that are all virtually based too, so that I can teach, teach anywhere.

Finding a Biological Dentist and Regenerative Care

That's great. We love it when science advances and we can offer people these cutting edge solutions for their problems. And that's exactly what we have this podcast for.

Well, I really. loved having this conversation with you. What would you tell our listeners if they want to say, okay, and this is a lot of information, what are the key take homes from this conversation?

The main take home is your gums can't bleed. That's probably your biggest threat to your overall health is if you have bleeding gums, and you need to get to the root cause of that.

That could be a simple fix, or it could be something more complex. I know we touched on briefly the sleep issues, Take your sleep issues seriously, no snoring, any apneic events or things like that.

Those are inflammatory and those don't, don't ignore that. Many of those are based in airway issues are based in orthodontics. Okay. Crowded, crowded arches, crowded teeth.

They have dental solutions. Okay. So be aware of that and you know, seek out the, you know, for an exam, seek out someone that's, that's doing more comprehensive stuff.

Yeah. Absolutely. That that's, that's amazing. I hope our listeners got a lot of great information from this. I know I did. I love working with dentists such as yourself and thank you for being on the podcast.

Key Takeaways on Proactive Oral Wellness

Thank you. It was an honor. Thank you for tuning in to Doctor Talks. We hope today's episode has enlightened and inspired you on your path to optimal health.

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