

# Childhood chicken pox could affect oral health years later

February 18 2009

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You may recall as a child catching the itchy red rash, chicken pox. The unsightly infection was caused by the varicella zoster virus and was responsible for nearly 4 million cases each year, according to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), until a vaccine introduced in 1995 reduced that number by 83 percent. Yet, if you were among those that suffered from chicken pox, the varicella zoster virus may still be present in your body and could lead to serious (and irreversible) oral health problems such as herpes-type lesions and severe bone damage to the jaws.

Varicella zoster can lie dormant in the body for decades, and if activated can lead to herpes zoster (HZ), more commonly referred to as shingles, according to a study that appeared in *General Dentistry*, the Academy of General Dentistry's (AGD) clinical, peer-reviewed journal.

Affecting nearly 1 million Americans each year, 50 percent of all new cases of herpes zoster occur in individuals over the age of 60.

"Herpes zoster manifests as painful blisters that erupt along the sensory nerves usually on one side of the body or face," according to co-author of the study, M.A. Pogrel, DDS, MD. "It can be a debilitating disease that can lead to osteonecrosis of the jaw and vision loss in addition to a prolonged painful syndrome."

Osteonecrosis is a condition in which bone in the lower or upper jaw becomes exposed. As a result, the jaw bone suffers severe damage and/or death, eventually leading to tooth loss.

While the exact reason for tooth loss is unknown, it has been noted that restricted blood flow and inflammation may be a cause.

However, AGD spokesperson, Laura Murcko, DMD, notes that, "Your dentist can help detect early signs of osteonecrosis of the jaw by checking for loose teeth, detached gums as well as taking dental x-rays."

Dr. Murcko encourages patients who may have signs of or are suffering from osteonecrosis to visit their dentist regularly and practice good oral hygiene. She recommends that patients consume 1,000 to 1,200 milligrams of calcium a day, add vitamin D to their diet, exercise and weight train, quit smoking and decrease caffeine and alcohol intake.

Symptoms of osteonecrosis:

- Pain, swelling or infection of the gums
- Loosening of teeth
- Poor healing of the gums
- Numbness or the feeling of heaviness in the jaw

Source: Academy of General Dentistry

Citation: Childhood chicken pox could affect oral health years later (2009, February 18)  
retrieved 23 April 2024 from

<https://medicalxpress.com/news/2009-02-childhood-chicken-pox-affect-oral.html>

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