

2010 TOP DENTISTS

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FLAMING LIPS

Flossing isn't everything when it comes to healthy gums.

Dr. Thomas Kang is a periodontist: a dentist who specializes in gums. Like most dentists, he advises his patients to floss. But for Kang, the issues go beyond flossing. In fact, a patient who comes to his Federal Way office with chronically inflamed gums is more likely to be sent to a primary care doctor than to be sent home with an extra box of floss.

That's because red, puffy, or bleeding gums may actually be a sign of more serious health conditions like diabetes, or heart or kidney disease. "Periodontal disease triggers the body's inflammatory response," explains Kang, "and, while inflammation initially intends to heal the body, over time chronic inflammation can lead to dysfunction of the infected tissues and therefore more severe health complications."

Kang remembers one active, healthy patient in her mid-40s whose dental implant wouldn't heal properly. When the implant ultimately failed to integrate, he sent the patient to a physician, who diagnosed her with Type 2 diabetes. "Uncontrolled Type 2 diabetes can lead to poor wound healing," he explains, "but once her physician was able to treat her condition, we could perform the implant successfully."

The take-home message is simple: "It's not 'floss or die,'" says Kang, "but having your dentist monitor your periodontal health regularly is very important."