Reteče 205, SI - 4220 Škofja Loka, Slovenija
T +386 82005358
E info@centerhocevar.com
Www.centerhocevar.com

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Why Treating Oral Infections Matters?

The link between oral infections and autoimmune disease

A growing, increasingly well-understood body of research connects chronic oral infections — gum disease and periapical (root-tip) infections — to autoimmune disease. The clearest evidence is for rheumatoid arthritis, where a specific bacterial mechanism has been identified. Here's a short summary of what the science shows.

How oral bacteria can trigger autoimmunity

Two periodontal bacteria have a documented mechanism for triggering autoimmune disease. Porphyromonas gingivalis produces a bacterial enzyme (PAD) that citrullinates human proteins — a chemical change the immune system can mistake for foreign, prompting it to produce anti-citrullinated protein antibodies, the hallmark antibody of rheumatoid arthritis. Aggregatibacter actinomycetemcomitans, another periodontal pathogen, triggers this same hypercitrullination process through a toxin that damages white blood cells.

Root canal infections show the same pattern

Periapical infections — in untreated or root-canal-treated teeth — are more common and heal less predictably in patients with rheumatoid arthritis and other autoimmune conditions. Recent genetic (Mendelian randomization) studies support a real, not just coincidental, relationship between the two.

What the research shows

1. A specific bacterial mechanism links gum disease to rheumatoid arthritis

Konig, M. F. et al., Science Translational Medicine, 2016; Maresz, K. J. et al., PLOS Pathogens, 2013

Researchers found that Aggregatibacter actinomycetemcomitans releases a toxin that causes white blood cells to hypercitrullinate proteins — the same abnormal modification seen in RA-affected joints. Separately, Porphyromonas gingivalis was shown to carry its own citrullinating enzyme, directly generating the altered proteins that trigger RA-specific antibodies.

This gives periodontal disease one of the most specific, mechanistically demonstrated pathways linking an oral infection to a systemic autoimmune disease.

2. Treating gum disease measurably reduces rheumatoid arthritis activity

Sun, J. et al., Clinical Oral Investigations, 2021 (meta-analysis)

Across nine pooled clinical trials, non-surgical periodontal treatment (scaling and root planing) significantly reduced RA disease activity (DAS28 score), along with tender and swollen joint counts.

The connection isn't just theoretical — treating gum disease measurably improves joint disease severity in people who have both conditions.

The strongest evidence connects oral infection to rheumatoid arthritis specifically, and even there a purely one-way causal effect isn't fully proven — genetics, smoking, and other factors also play a role. But the mechanism and the treatment-response data are strong enough that oral health is now considered a genuine, actionable part of managing autoimmune joint disease, not just a separate dental issue.

What you can do

- Treat gum disease and root canal infections promptly, especially if you have or are at risk of rheumatoid arthritis or another autoimmune condition.
- Don't ignore bleeding or inflamed gums — the same bacteria involved are implicated in triggering RA-specific antibodies.
- Tell your dentist if you have an autoimmune disease — inflammation and some medications (e.g. immunosuppressants) affect healing and infection risk.
- Keep up regular dental check-ups and cleanings as part of managing autoimmune disease, not only for your teeth.
- Mention new joint pain or swelling to your doctor alongside any gum or tooth symptoms.

Sources

- Konig, M. F. et al. (2016). Aggregatibacter actinomycetemcomitans–induced hypercitrullination links periodontal infection to autoimmunity in rheumatoid arthritis. Science Translational Medicine, 8(369).
- Maresz, K. J. et al. (2013). Porphyromonas gingivalis facilitates the development and progression of destructive arthritis through its unique bacterial peptidylarginine deiminase (PAD). PLOS Pathogens, 9(9).
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