HEAVY MARIJUANA USE LINKED TO GUM DISEASE

DURHAM, N.C. -- Heavy marijuana use has been found to contribute to gum disease, apart from the known effects that tobacco smoke was already known to have.

In a group of more than 900 New Zealanders, smoking cannabis more than 40 times in the previous year was found to be responsible for more than one-third of the new cases of periodontal disease between ages 26 and 32, according to a study published Feb. 6 in the Journal of the American Medical Association.

"Heavy cannabis use has been linked to greater risks of developing respiratory disease and some psychiatric conditions," said Terrie Moffit, a Duke University professor of psychology and neuroscience who participated in the study. "Gum disease should be added to that list of known hazards."

The study was led by W. Murray Thomson of the school of dentistry at The University of Otago, NZ, who measured gum recession at three spots on each tooth at ages 26 and again at 32. The study subjects are part of a longitudinal health and development study that has been tracking nearly 1000 people born in Dunedin, New Zealand in 1972 and 1973.

The link between gum disease and marijuana use emerged from a statistical analysis that controlled for gender, dental care, socio-economic status and how clean or dirty the teeth were. Most of the self-identified heavy marijuana users were also tobacco-users, but that factor was also controlled statistically.

The precise physiology of smoke's effect on the gums is still not understood, but the team believes that it interferes with immune function, inflammatory response and peripheral blood flow in the gums.

In addition to Moffit and Thomson, the study included Richie Poulton, David Welch and Robert Hancox of the Dunedin School of Medicine, dentists Jonathan Broadbent of Otago and James Beck of the University of North Carolina, and Avshalom Caspi, of Duke University. Support came from the U.S. National Institutes of Health, the UK Medical Research Council, and the Health Research Council of New Zealand.

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