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Dental Checkup Could Save Your Life

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BAY AREA (KRON) – Most people think a trip to the dentist is just a way to make sure their teeth and gums are healthy. But these days dentists do a lot more than just look at your mouth, in fact they could save your life.

When Tony Sweet came to Doctor Bruce Harley's dental office he was expecting a fairly routine oral exam. But he got a lot more than that.

"Before he got to doing the dental check of the health of the teeth, he found a very tiny white spot on the soft palate in the back, it was enough to make him concerned. He recommended I go see a specialist and to have them take a look at it," Sweet says.

The specialist was also concerned and removed the suspect tissue. Fortunately it turned out to be benign. But it was a good example of how dentists can spot potential problems early.

Cosmetic dentist Dr. Bruce Harley says, "We are doing a medical screening of the mouth, the head, and neck and since patients are coming in twice a year we are really on the front line of picking up a lot of diseases that can show signs or symptoms in the face or in the mouth."

In fact, dentists are now trained to pick up signs of everything from cancer to heart disease, HIV/AIDS, diabetes, even domestic violence. It is one more reason to make sure you visit the dentist twice a year, not just to stay on top of your oral health, but to stay on top of your overall health.

Dr. Harley says, "I don't think we see our patients as a big tooth, so we see the patient as a person who has certain needs in many areas and if we can contribute to making them healthier then we'll take that role."

Taking care of your teeth and gums can also reduce your risk of other diseases too. For example, several studies have shown that people with gum disease are at higher risk for heart attacks or strokes.