

How a Dentist Can Save Your Life...

Life is full of choices. We can make all the excuses in the world, but each and every day is filled with opportunities that we can choose to handle however we want. Isn't that cool?

Years ago, I chose to become a dentist. One of the deciding factors in my decision was my future family. Even then, my goal was to be a great father. Dentistry has few emergencies and few midnight runs to hospitals to take us away from our families. The trade off is less excitement. We rarely get to save lives. That is, until recently.

This is not an article about how fillings, crowns, and root canals save teeth. Nor is this about how gum disease should be treated as a chronic, life threatening infection because it is linked to diabetes and heart disease. This article could be about how a rebuilt, beautiful, confident smile at the correct bite can change someone's life, but it's not. Those things are all important, but few people die from off-white teeth. Gum disease can contribute to other life threatening conditions, but most patients suffer the loss of all their teeth long before the gum disease kills them. This article is about a condition that is not linked, but recognized as a causative factor in a laundry list of things that do kill, such as heart attacks and stroke. This article is about sleep apnea.

More and more research is coming out about the ways in which obstructive sleep apnea (OSA) can kill. To make a long story short, OSA is a condition in which patients are unable to achieve deep and restful sleep. There can be a variety of causes and the effects can range from daytime sleepiness to death by stroke. OSA can and does kill every day.

What does this all have to do with teeth? Most patients who get diagnosed with OSA are prescribed a machine (called a CPAP) that helps them breathe and achieve restful sleep. This machine works great, but for a variety of reasons, a large portion of OSA patients quit wearing their breathing machines. Without the CPAP every night, the restless sleep returns, along with the associated risks of death.

Under the right circumstances, patients who cannot or will not tolerate their breathing machines may be treated with an oral appliance that holds open the patient's airway and allows proper sleep. This is where dentistry and OSA intersect. For those who are not wearing your CPAP, a dentist can save your life.

I'm a believer. I wear an oral appliance every night myself.

Until next week, keep smiling.

-Please send comments to Drs. Parrish through www.ParrishDental.com.