An alternative therapy?

Have you ever heard of oil pulling? Neither had Alison Lowe until one of her patients extolled its virtues, so she decided to find out more.

Oil pulling has been described as a traditional Indian folk remedy that involves swishing oil in the mouth for claimed systemic and oral health benefits which include prevention of gingivitis and periodontal disease, erosion caused by acid reflux, dental caries, halitosis, dryness of the throat and cracked lips. There are even claims that it can be used to straighten teeth and align jaws – although I’m not sure that many orthodontists would agree!

Oil pulling traces its roots to oil gargling practiced in Ayurvedic medicine in India (mainly the south) more than 2,000 years ago, but it has recently come back into the limelight in India with widespread marketing aimed at both the public and the dental profession.

Literature review

An extensive literature review revealed very little in British journals relating to the practice, but a few papers have been published in Indian dental journals. One such study compared the effect of oil pulling using sesame oil with chlorhexidine on plaque-induced gingivitis. Twenty aged-matched adolescent boys with plaque-induced gingivitis were randomly divided into two groups. Plaque index and modified gingival index scores were recorded and baseline plaque samples were collected which were used to identify and measure total colony count of aerobic microorganisms. The boys rinsed with either oil or chlorhexidine every morning before eating or brushing. On completion of the trial both groups showed a reduction in plaque index, modified gingival scores and total colony count of aerobic bacteria.

In another randomly controlled, triple blind study there was found to be a statistically significant reduction in the Strept. mutans count in the plaque and saliva samples of both the study and control group using a Den-Tocult SM Strept mutans test. The researchers concluded: ‘Our study has shown that sesame oil has an antibacterial effect. The reduction in bacterial count ranged from 10 to 3.4 percent and the average reduction in bacterial count was 20 percent after 40 days of oil pulling. Therefore the sesame oil is found to be effective in reducing Strept. mutans and adhesion.’

The Journal of Oral and Community Dentistry published a research paper, which found that:

‘Oil pulling resulted in a significant reduction in plaque and gingivitis and although it can’t be considered as a replacement for tooth brushing, there were no adverse reactions and it could definitely be used to supplement a patient’s oral hygiene routine.’

The oil-pulling procedure

Oil pulling is an easy (although somewhat time consuming) process that should be repeated every day. The patient rinses their mouth with approximately one tablespoon of oil (sesame and sunflower are the most recommended) for 15 to 20 minutes on an empty stomach then spits it out. The best time is in the morning before breakfast, but it can be done before any meal. The aim is to thoroughly mix the oil with saliva until it becomes thin in texture and white in colour. The oil is put into the mouth with the chin tilted up and then slowly swished and pulled through the teeth, from left to right, back to front and vice versa.

I’m told that it helps if you can close your eyes, concentrate and imagine the liquid moving in your mouth. Throughout the process the oil changes from a thick, yellow and oily consistency to a pale, almost transparent smudge which ‘pulls’ out bacteria and plaque debris. It is thought to act much like the oil you put in your car engine, the oil picks up dirt and grime which forms a sediment and then when you drain it, the sediment is removed leaving the engine relatively clean.

The main disadvantage of oil pulling is that it is time consuming – how many of us can spare 15 to 20 minutes every morning? However, there is a similar procedure known as ‘Dinacharya’ where you just swish for four minutes, but I’m guessing that’s still three minutes too long for many people. On the plus side it is easy, inexpensive and relatively harmless.

Conclusion

I am a firm believer in evidence-based dentistry (EBD) and therefore must confess that I find myself slightly sceptical about the practice of oil pulling (I prefer to get my essential oils from Listerine mouthwash). Still, you shouldn’t knock it until you’ve tried it and although there is limited scientific evidence or proof of its efficacy, it is possible that oil pulling can be used as an effective, preventive adjunct in both maintaining and improving oral health.

References


About the author

Alison Lowe is a dental hygienist based in Cardiff, at The Orthodontic Centre, a private practice specializing in implants, cosmetic work and periodontal and Cardiff Dental School. She has won several awards including Hygienist of the Year 2008 and is a columnist for the Western Mail. She thoroughly enjoys what she does and is delighted to be contributing to Dental Tribune UK.