The importance of oral health to the military mission.

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The warfighting member, regardless of service affiliation, is the focus of any military force. As such, mission success depends on the service member’s well-being and fitness. Oral health, being one facet of overall health, is often misunderstood or relegated as another annual requirement or a “checkbox” to complete prior to mission deployments.

Because dental care is often taken for granted, dental health is a frequently neglected part of overall health. Fortunately, military dental care provides tremendous preventive dental services, where relatively few service members experience dental emergencies. So the question that begs to be asked is, “What makes oral health significant, and how does oral health relate to mission readiness?”

As an important aspect to the quality of life and general health of an individual, oral health can be thought of as a condition where an individual is free of oral disease, such as dental caries (tooth decay), periodontal disease (gum), dental pain and oral cancer. To the dental practitioner, the oral cavity and its health is often a reflection and contributor to both health and ailments.

With normal oral hygiene practice, (brushing and flossing) and a healthy host immune system, the careful balance of normal bacteria flora in the mouth is kept in check. When this careful balance is disturbed, bacterial infections can not only cause common oral disease such as dental caries, but other more destructive disease processes as well.

Examples include periodontal disease, which has been linked to low birth weight and bacterial infections associated with endocarditis (infection of the heart lining). Research has even demonstrated possible correlations between oral bacterial infections and systemic illnesses, such as diabetes and cardiovascular disease. Dental issues and emergencies can present monumental distractions to the mission and serve as a considerable downgrade in the quality of life.

Created in July 1949, the U.S. Air Force Dental Service contributes and supports the mission of the Air Force by fulfilling its mission of providing worldwide oral health and preventive services to Air Force service members. Given the importance of service members as the pillar to our military and mission success, enough cannot be stressed on ensuring the health of our armed forces, which includes the often overlooked impact of dental fitness.

One final dental axiom I will share is: “Brush and floss only the teeth you want to keep”.