

## Gum Disease

### What is it? (signs) and what might it feel like? (symptoms)

Gum disease is a broad term used to describe a swelling, soreness or sometimes infection of the tissues supporting the teeth. There are two main forms of gum disease: gingivitis and periodontal disease which will range from a bit of bleeding from your gums when brushing your teeth to the teeth becoming loose and falling out or needing extraction.

Gingivitis means 'inflammation of the gums'. This is when the gums around the teeth can become very red and swollen. Often the swollen gums bleed when they are brushed during cleaning. All gum disease is caused by plaque. Plaque is a sticky film of bacteria that builds constantly which is why it is important to brush well twice a day, every day. The reason the gums bleed is the body's response to the presence of bacteria within the plaque, it is your body's first line of defense and is trying to alert you that there is something wrong. It would be advisable to seek advice from a dental professional if you notice blood while brushing. Gingivitis is reversible with good oral hygiene although you may be left with some gum recession which is part of the healing process. If gingivitis is left untreated for too long the disease can progress and can turn into periodontal disease also known as periodontitis. Periodontitis is the 6th most common disease in the world and is significantly linked to general well-being and longevity. It is often 'silent' and can be present for decades without diagnosis and treatment. There are a number of types of periodontal disease and they all affect the tissues supporting the teeth. As the disease gets worse the bone anchoring the teeth in the jaw is lost, making the teeth loose. If this is not treated, the teeth may eventually fall out. Once you have periodontitis it is irreversible and never goes away. There isn't a cure for it and it needs to be maintained constantly through a strict and thorough oral hygiene routine being the most important and to also see a dental hygienist regularly for gum treatment and to see and a dentist for check-ups.

Main signs & symptoms:

- Bleeding from gums when brushing
- Bad breath
- Metallic taste – this is usually in the morning when you wake up
- Red looking/swollen gums
- Gums can feel tender
- May notice teeth getting loose

Smoking

Smoking can make gum disease worse. Gum disease can sometimes go undetected in the early stages due to smoking. This is because the tiny blood vessels that supply the gums are diminished of oxygen therefore may not bleed, nor is the body's first line of defence (the bloodstream) able to fight off the bacteria within the plaque present. People who smoke are also more likely to produce bacterial plaque, which leads to gum disease. The gums are affected as smoking causes a lack of oxygen in the bloodstream, so the gums don't have the ability to heal as well as those in a non-smoker. Smoking causes people to have more plaque which can also be stickier than usual due to the tar and nicotine within cigarette smoke. In turn, this causes the gum disease to get worse more

quickly than in non-smokers. It is worth noting that while you continue to smoke your gum disease may stabilise but is unlikely to improve. Your dental professional may encourage you to quit smoking to improve your general and dental health. For more on smoking and oral health and information on how to quit smoking please see our Oral health and general health page.

### **Possible treatment**

If you think you have gum disease it is important to seek help from a dental professional sooner rather than later. A dentist will complete a thorough check-up of your teeth and gums. They will measure the 'cuff' of gum around each tooth to see if there is any sign that periodontal disease has started. X-rays should also be taken to see the amount of bone that has been lost and calculate your susceptibility and treatment need. This assessment is very important, so the correct treatment can be prescribed for you. Your dentist may then refer you to see a dental hygienist to begin treating your gum disease. They will explain gum disease to you in detail and what treatment is necessary. The hygienist will clean your teeth thoroughly using something called an ultrasonic scaler. This device vibrates very fast and uses both air and water to remove hardened plaque known as calculus – similar to scale on the inside of a kettle which is likely to be both above and below your gumline, this does most of the 'heavy lifting' and the air element introduces oxygen under the gums which breaks up the plaque bacteria. They may then go around the teeth with a hand scaler to remove fine deposits of calculus. You may find the procedure a little uncomfortable however, it can be done using local anaesthetic if you would prefer. In some cases, gum disease may have progressed below the gumline affecting the roots of the teeth known as 'pocketing'. If this is the case you may require something called root surface debridement or 'RSD'. You'll probably need these areas requiring RSD to be numbed using a local anaesthetic before anything is done. Afterwards, you may experience some sensitivity and feel a little discomfort once the anaesthetic has worn off. The sensitivity may last up to the next 48 hours. You may also find that your gums will shrink a little or recede as the inflammation reduces. Gum recession is unavoidable and part of the healing process as your gums begin to firm up around your teeth again.

This is just the initial treatment and your gum disease won't 'go away' after this session. The most important part of the treatment to help improve the health of your gums is to be able to remove plaque effectively with a strict oral hygiene routine.

A dental professional will tailor a dental hygiene routine that is specific to you and your mouth. It is very important to continuously follow this oral hygiene routine. Failure to do so may result in your gums not responding to treatment. The oral hygiene routine will include an effective brushing method and also how to clean in between your teeth. This is the most important thing you can do to help prevent gum disease getting worse and giving yourself the best chance of the treatment you have had being successful.

Unfortunately, gum disease does not usually cause pain as it gets worse so you do not notice the damage it is doing. However, the bacteria are sometimes more active and this makes your gums sore. This can lead to gum abscesses, and pus may ooze from around the teeth. Over a number of years, the bone supporting the teeth can be lost and does not 'grow' back. If the disease is left untreated for a long time, treatment to save your teeth can be more difficult. You may also choose not to treat your gum disease accepting the risks or potential, pain, swelling and tooth loss.

### **What can I do myself to help?**

The most important thing you can do to help yourself is to be responsible for your gum disease. If you have not yet sought advice from a dental professional and you are worried you have gum disease it's the best place to start. If you have seen a dental professional

such as a dental hygienist and been given an oral hygiene routine to follow then do so.

- Brush your teeth twice a day preferably with a rechargeable electric toothbrush, if you can. If not a small headed manual toothbrush ensuring you reach the gumline with an effective brushing technique – do NOT scrub your teeth and gums
- Clean in between every tooth DAILY using interdental brushes, sweeping vigorously against the gumline ensuring a snug fit for effective plaque removal. Use interdental brushes BEFORE you brush your teeth that way you won't forget.
- Change your manual toothbrush or your electric toothbrush head every 3 months
- Interdental brushes should be changed weekly
- Keep up with regular dental check-ups and hygienist visits. How often you need to be seen will depend on the severity of your gum disease

In recent years gum disease has been linked with general health conditions such as diabetes, strokes, cardiovascular disease, obesity, and even dementia. More research is needed to understand how these links work but there is more and more evidence that having a healthy mouth and gums can help improve your general health and vice versa in term reducing the costs of medical and dental treatment.

<http://www.dentalhealth.org>

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