

Keeping your gums healthy



Healthy gums are part of a healthy smile, and you can take these steps to keep your gums healthy:

- brushing;
- cleaning between your teeth with floss or another interdental cleaner;
- visiting your dentist regularly.

These are all important in preventing gum disease.

WHAT IS GUM DISEASE?

Gum disease affects the tissues that support your teeth, causing them to pull away from the tooth. It can be limited to just the soft tissue—the gums—or it can progress to the bone that supports your teeth. In severe cases, you can lose teeth because of gum disease.

Gum disease is caused by plaque. Plaque is a sticky film of bacteria that forms on everyone's teeth all the time. This bacteria can damage your teeth and gums, which is why it is important to brush and clean between your teeth every day. Plaque can harden along the gum line, forming a substance called calculus. Calculus can only be removed with a professional cleaning by a dentist or dental hygienist. During the cleaning, the dentist or dental hygienist will use a special tool to scrape the hardened calculus and plaque from along and beneath your gum line.

Symptoms of gum disease include:

- gums that are red, swollen, and bleed easily (like when you brush or clean between your teeth);
- gums that seem to have pulled away from the teeth;
- constant bad breath;
- pus between your teeth and gums;
- teeth that seem to be loose or moving away from one another;
- a change in the way your teeth fit together when you bite;
- a change in the way your partial dentures fit.

Gum disease can range from mild to severe. Mild gum disease is called gingivitis. The main signs of gingivitis are red, swollen gums that may or may not be tender. During this stage, your gums may bleed after you brush or clean between your teeth. When the disease progresses to the supporting bone, pockets can form

where more bacteria can collect. Any calculus that builds up then traps plaque in these pockets. This plaque cannot be removed by personal hygiene (brushing and flossing).

More advanced forms of gum disease require professional cleanings that go deeper below the gum line. Sometimes the dentist will refer you to a specialist, called a periodontist, for these cleanings.

HOW CAN I KEEP MY GUMS HEALTHY?

To prevent gum disease:

- brush your teeth twice a day;
- clean between your teeth with floss or another interdental cleaner once every day;
- see your dentist for an examination and a professional cleaning regularly;
- show your dentist or dental hygienist how you brush and clean between your teeth and ask if you can make any improvements;
- if you smoke or chew tobacco, stop. Tobacco use increases the risk of gum disease.

Health conditions like AIDS or cancer, which reduce your body's ability to fight infection, can increase your risk of developing gum disease. Some researchers also have noticed that people who have diabetes often have gum disease as well. Some medications, like antiseizure or blood pressure drugs, can affect your gums, too. The gums also are very sensitive to hormonal changes, such as those that occur during pregnancy. Thus, it is important for pregnant women to see their dentist.

Keeping your mouth healthy is possible with daily care and regular visits to your dentist. Tell your dentist about your general health, personal habits—like tobacco use—that can affect your health, and medication use, in addition to your oral health and hygiene habits. Give him or her the big picture when developing a treatment plan for you to help keep your gums healthy. ■

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