

Healthy You

FAST FACTS FOR YOUR HEALTH

All About Gum Disease

Nearly half of adults over 30 suffer from some form of gum disease, also known as periodontal disease. Research shows a link between gum disease and many other chronic illnesses, including heart disease and diabetes, all of which are inflammatory diseases.

The matter is so serious that governors in 28 states have signed proclamations declaring February Gum Disease Awareness Month. Find out the facts about gum disease – and what you can do to prevent it.

What It Is

Gum disease is a chronic infection. It can leave you with sensitive and loose teeth; persistent bad breath; and gums that are tender, red and swollen. In most cases, it's caused by the bacteria in the buildup of plaque under and along the gums. The earliest stage of gum disease is called gingivitis, while advanced gum disease is called periodontitis. Gum disease is the leading cause of tooth loss in adults.

Causes

A number of factors contribute to plaque buildup, leading to gum disease. Poor dental hygiene, including brushing and flossing improperly, can be a major contributor. A poor diet and lack of vitamin C can also make gums vulnerable to infection, as can stress. All forms of tobacco, including cigarettes and chewing tobacco, have been linked to gum disease. Medical conditions, such as diabetes, HIV and pregnancy, and use of some medications may also increase your risk for gum disease.

Finally, genetics can play a role. As many as **30 percent of people may be at risk for gum disease** just because of their genes, making them up to **six times as likely to have periodontal disease** as those without a family history of the problem. That's another reason regular preventive dental visits are so important.

Treatment

To treat gum disease, especially for moderate cases, dentists often recommend a special procedure called scaling and root planing. Scaling involves the removal of plaque and tartar from the surface of the tooth, while planing targets the tooth root. This deeper cleaning, focused on areas below the gum line, often requires anesthesia.

If the problem is severe, your dentist may recommend periodontal surgery to remove the tartar, bacteria and diseased tissues. This treatment reattaches your gum tissue to healthy

bone. Your dentist may also prescribe a special mouth rinse, antibiotic gel or oral medication to help control harmful bacteria.

Prevention

The best way to prevent gum disease is to follow a routine oral health regimen and overall healthy lifestyle. These steps can go a long way toward keeping your gums healthy.

- Brush for two minutes, twice a day, and floss at least once a day.
- Avoid using tobacco products.
- Eat a balanced diet low in sugar.
- Stay on top of your routine dental visits for regular cleanings and exams.

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Readers Ask, We Answer

Dawn asks: “I keep my toothbrush in a cup on the counter. Is there a more sanitary way I should store it?”

We answer: Hi, Dawn. The American Dental Association recommends storing your toothbrush in an upright position, so it sounds like you’re already doing well. If you share the toothbrush cup with your spouse or children, make sure the bristles don’t touch, or germs can spread from one toothbrush to another. It’s best to let your toothbrush air-dry between uses, so don’t use a cover or store it in a closed container or drawer. Also, if you store your toothbrush on the counter, be sure to keep it 3 to 4 feet away from the toilet.

While we’re talking toothbrush maintenance, here’s another quick tip: Don’t forget to replace your toothbrush every three months. That’s typically when bristles start to get frayed, which means they aren’t as effective at cleaning your teeth. If your toothbrush looks worn before the three-month mark, go ahead and replace it.

Have a question you’d like us to answer? Send it to grin@deltadental.com, and it could be featured in an upcoming issue.