

Nothing Comes Between Me and My Gums

The biggest threat to strong teeth and a great smile in adults is gum disease — and it is more common than you think. Gum disease, or periodontal disease, is the primary cause of tooth loss in adults. An estimated 80 percent of American adults currently have some form of the disease.

Gum disease can go easily unnoticed because it causes no pain in most cases. That's why it's important to know what to watch for. Gum disease can be stopped and its effects reversed with proper care at home, early detection and treatment in the initial stages.

Basics of Gum Disease

- Gum disease is caused by bacteria in plaque — that sticky film that accumulates on teeth above and below the gum line.
- If not removed by daily brushing and flossing, plaque build up hardens into tartar (calculus). This irritates the gum next to the tooth. Toxins from the bacteria in the plaque cause the gums to become infected, red and tender.
- Gingivitis is the earliest stage of gum disease. Gums that are normally pink become red or purplish and swollen. They may feel tender and can bleed during brushing and flossing. Gingivitis also can cause chronic bad breath.
- Without professional cleaning to stop the spread of gingivitis, the infection will spread and affect the bone that supports the teeth.
- Periodontitis is the advanced stage of gum disease. This occurs when pockets around the teeth fill with infection and destroy gums and bone. Periodontitis is usually detected during a dental exam.

Signs of Gum Disease

If you notice any of these warning signs of gum disease, see your dentist.

- Gums that bleed while brushing or flossing
- Gums that have pulled back from the teeth
- Tender, red or swollen gums
- Constant bad breath
- Loose teeth
- Pus between teeth and gums

What A Dentist Looks For

- The dentist first looks at the color and firmness of your gums and checks for loose teeth.
- To check the attachment of teeth to the surrounding gum, a thin metal ruler called a probe is used to measure in millimeters the depth of the space or pockets between each tooth and the gum.
- You may hear the dentist or dental hygienist call out numbers to record in your chart as he or she probes into a periodontal pocket. In a healthy mouth, the depth of these pockets is usually between 1 and 3 millimeters.
- An x-ray may be taken to see whether there is any bone loss.

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- If necessary, your dentist may refer you to a periodontist, a specialist who treats diseases of the gums and bone that support the teeth.

Treating Periodontal Disease

- Treatment techniques depend on the extent of the gum disease.
- Treatment for early stages of gum disease may be done by your dentist, periodontist or dental hygienist. It includes a deep cleaning method called scaling and root planing. Scaling means scraping off the tartar from above and below the gum line. Root planing gets rid of rough spots on the tooth roots where bacteria that contribute to the disease accumulate.
- In more advanced cases, surgical treatment that lifts back the gums may be required to remove tartar deposits in deep pockets.

Protecting Yourself

- Brush at least twice a day with a fluoride/tartar control toothpaste to keep that ever-present plaque to a minimum.
- Floss every day to prevent plaque buildup between teeth.
- Visit your dentist regularly for a check-up and professional cleaning.
- In addition to brushing and flossing, an antimicrobial mouth rinse to help kill bacteria may be recommended by your dentist.
- Eat a well balanced diet. Good nutrition helps the body fight infection.
- Stop smoking.

Sources: Academy of General Dentistry: www.agd.org; National Institute for Dental and Cranial Research: www.nidcr.nih.gov