

What is Gum Disease?

Do your gums ever bleed when you brush or floss? Many people think bleeding is normal, but it's really the start of the periodontal changes that can lead to gum disease.

The word “periodontal” literally means “around the tooth”, and refers to the gums and bone surrounding and supporting the teeth. For healthy teeth, gums, and bone, bacterial plaque must be regularly cleaned away from around the teeth and underneath the gums before that bacteria has a chance to multiply further. If these bacteria are allowed to reproduce without being disrupted and cleared away, their numbers increase beyond the body's ability to control them and disease sets in.

When this happens, the toxins produced by the ever-growing bacterial colony irritate the gums to the extent that they trigger the body into a chronic inflammatory response. Left untreated, this condition in essence causes the body to turn on itself in an effort to eliminate the spreading infection. The gums and bone surrounding the teeth are broken down and destroyed, creating periodontal pockets and bone loss that can progress to a point where the teeth eventually become loose and may even fall out.

Speech, digestion, and overall systemic health are all affected. Active gum disease is also one of the most common sources of chronic bad breath.

the silent enemy

Gum disease is often referred to as the ‘silent enemy’ because its symptoms are often quite mild until the very advanced stages of progression. But that doesn't mean that you can't do anything about it.

When thinking about gum disease remember these two things:

- For most people, adequate oral hygiene combined with regular cleanings and check-ups can prevent periodontal conditions from ever developing into disease.
- Even though there is no cure for gum disease once it has taken hold, it can be controlled to the point where the potential of future damage is minimized or even eliminated.



Why Does Gum Disease Happen?

There are many factors that can influence the body's natural ability to fight oral bacteria. Inadequate home care is the primary reason that many people develop gingivitis, the precursor to gum disease. Good oral home care isn't just about how many times you brush and floss, though. Even people who brush and floss 2 or 3 times a day can develop gingivitis if they haven't been taught how to do it correctly. And other health factors may also affect the body's ability to fight gum disease, even when you are brushing and flossing regularly and correctly.

Any one of the conditions listed below can increase your risk factors for developing gum disease:

- Stress
- Chronic illness
- A depressed immune system
- Certain kinds of medication and medication interactions
- Smoking
- Lack of adequate nutrition
- Hormonal fluctuations, including those related to menstruation, pregnancy and menopause

Even children and teenagers are not immune to gum disease. Childhood periodontal issues are mostly due to a lack of brushing and flossing, but often finger dexterity can be an issue as well. Most people don't realize that young children do not have the manual dexterity to properly brush and floss their teeth until they are able to write well.



Why Does Gum Disease Happen? (cont'd)

The importance of developing handwriting skills has decreased in favor of computer keyboarding skills in recent years. But typing does not develop the same kind of finger dexterity that writing does, and some children may require more practice and parental guidance in order to brush and floss correctly – sometimes even well into their early teens.

Preventing and controlling the spread of periodontal disease may not only improve the health of your teeth and gums, however, it may also be a major factor in protecting you against other chronic conditions as well. Research on multiple kinds of inflammatory disease is now confirming strong associations between periodontal disease and other chronic inflammatory conditions including diabetes, cardiovascular disease, and even Alzheimer's.

How Can Gum Disease Be Prevented?

Brushing and flossing regularly and correctly are the first best steps in preventing pathogenic periodontal conditions from ever developing. Regular dental care is also extremely important in monitoring the small changes that can happen in the mouth over time due to factors that cannot be controlled with excellent home care. Chronic bleeding, tenderness, or inflammation in your mouth is often an indication that further treatment is necessary – even if you are not experiencing any pain. Periodontal conditions can change very quickly, especially if there are other changes in the body to consider. Any time you notice any of these symptoms lasting for more than a few days, you should call your dentist to schedule an evaluation.



References:

American Academy of Periodontology: *Gum Disease Risk Factors*

American Academy of Periodontology: *Gum Disease Symptoms*

American Academy of Periodontology: *Periodontal Disease and Systemic Health*