

Gum Disease

What is periodontal disease?

Periodontal disease is also known as gum disease or periodontitis. There are various stages of gum disease, and the two most common forms are gingivitis and adult periodontitis. Gingivitis is an inflammation or infection of the gums (gingiva) that is an early stage of periodontal disease. When left untreated, gingivitis may progress to periodontal disease, which can progress to the loss of teeth. Only a professional -- a dentist or periodontist -- can diagnose gum disease, which often is painless. Tobacco products contribute to poor periodontal health. Research shows that periodontal disease may also be linked to heart and respiratory disease, and to premature birth.

How does it progress?

A combination of bacteria and acids in the mouth form a sticky deposit called dental plaque that clings to the teeth. Plaque that is not removed from the teeth hardens into calculus and tarter, which aggravate the gums. Pockets (filled with plaque) form between the teeth and gums - causing the irritated gums to detach or pull away from the teeth. At this point, the infection has advanced below the gum line and it can then destroy the soft tissue, bone and ligaments that support the teeth. The teeth may become abscessed and loose, and even fall out. Periodontal disease is the leading cause of tooth loss in adults.

What are the symptoms?

The symptoms of gingivitis are:

- Inflamed, swollen gums that bleed easily when they are brushed or flossed
- Smokers may experience very little bleeding
- Bad breathe
- Little or no pain in the early stages

The late-stage symptoms of periodontitis:

- Loose teeth
- Spaces in between the teeth
- Pain upon chewing
- Pus around the teeth or gums, or abscessed teeth
- Receding gums may be a symptom and the tooth may appear to look longer because the gums are withdrawing
- The teeth may be sensitive to cold, hot and sugars

Who is at risk for gum disease?

Periodontal disease is not hereditary, but it may play a role in the progression of the disease. Individuals with diabetes and those on certain medications (i.e., immunosuppressants) may be at risk for periodontitis. Use of tobacco in any form can cause periodontal disease to advance more rapidly.

How do you prevent it?

Keeping the teeth clean by brushing and flossing on a regular basis will help prevent gum disease.

How is it treated?

Treatment is based upon the severity of the gum disease and how far it has progressed. Treatment may range from a thorough cleaning of the roots of the teeth to periodontal surgery for more advanced problems.

When do you need to see a dentist?

The dentist is the individual who should monitor your overall oral health care and recommend that you see a specialist, if necessary. If you have any problems or suspect you may have gum disease, contact your dentist or a periodontist.