



Gum (Periodontal) Disease

Periodontal (gum) disease is an infection of the tissues surrounding and supporting the teeth. It is the major cause of tooth loss in adults. However, because gum disease is usually painless, you may not know you have it. Early diagnosis and treatment is essential since control of periodontal disease is far easier in the early stages.

Periodontal disease is caused by plaque, a sticky film of bacteria that constantly forms on the teeth, and calculus (tartar). These bacteria create toxins that can damage the gums. In the early stage of gum disease, called gingivitis, the gums can become red, swollen and bleed easily. At this stage, the disease is still reversible and can usually be eliminated by daily brushing and flossing.

In the more advanced stages of gum disease, called periodontitis, the gums and bone that support the teeth can become seriously damaged. This leads to gum recession and “pocket” formation.

The infection and its outcome is not a simple relationship because some people are more susceptible to periodontitis than others. People with poor general health, medical problems (such as diabetes) and smokers generally have worse periodontal condition.

Management of periodontal disease begins with assessing and monitoring periodontal health. e.g. recording pocket depths. The goal of treatment is to remove as many bacteria from the pockets as possible by thorough cleaning and root planing and then maintain this state with excellent home care and regular professional maintenance visits. Left untreated, these pockets continue to deteriorate leading to gum abscesses and premature loss of the affected teeth. Associated problems include bad breath, mobile teeth, receding gums and a metallic taste.

Home Care

Brushing should be done *twice* daily using a *soft* bristled brush angled at 45° to the gum. A tiny circular motion is best concentrating on 1 or 2 teeth at a time. Brushing the top of the tongue, especially at the back, should also be done as this harbours many bacteria that can cause bad breath.

Flossing should be done *once* daily. I recommend Colgate Total™ dental ribbon. Remember that flossing is just wiping the tooth surface, not sawing back and forward.

Interdental brushes should be used *once* daily in those spaces they fit. Dipping the tip in Savacol™ is useful if these spaces are tender or inflamed. We have found the Piksters™ brand particularly useful because there are many size options.

I do not necessarily recommend daily mouth rinsing but many people like to do it. The most effective rinse is Savacol™ (or any other chlorhexidine containing rinse). It should not be used daily because it stains the teeth and long term use desensitizes the taste buds. Once or twice per week is fine. Regular use of Listerine™ is okay but I find it makes the mouth dry.

Remember, regular professional maintenance visits are an essential part of ensuring continued dental health.