



PERIODONTAL DISEASE

Periodontal disease (gum disease) is an infection of the tissues that surround and support your teeth. It is a major cause of tooth loss in adults. Gum disease is caused by plaque, the sticky film of bacteria that constantly forms on our teeth. Some studies indicate that severe gum disease may be linked to other health conditions such as diabetes or stroke.

Gum disease is usually painless. These are the warning signs¹:

- gums that bleed easily and are red, swollen, and tender
- gums that have pulled away from the teeth
- persistent bad breath or bad taste
- permanent teeth that are loose or separating
- any change in the way your teeth fit together when you bite
- any change in the fit of partial dentures

These factors increase the risk of developing gum disease:

- poor oral hygiene
- smoking or chewing tobacco
- genetics
- crooked teeth that are hard to keep clean
- pregnancy
- diabetes
- medications, including steroids, certain types of anti-epileptic drugs, cancer therapy drugs, some calcium channel blockers, and oral contraceptives

Types of periodontal disease

Gingivitis is the early stage of gum disease, when gums are red, swollen, tender, and bleed easily. It can usually be eliminated with a dental cleaning and daily brushing and flossing. The sooner you treat it, the better.

Advanced gum disease is called periodontitis. Chronic periodontitis can lead to the loss of tissue and bone that support the teeth, causing your teeth to feel loose. Conditions usually worsen slowly but can rapidly progress. Chronic periodontitis is the most common form of periodontitis in adults but can occur at any age.

Aggressive periodontitis is a highly destructive form of periodontal disease that occurs in patients who are otherwise healthy. Common features include rapid loss of tissue and bone and may occur in some areas of the mouth, or in the entire mouth.

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Diagnosis

Since it is possible to have gum disease without warning signs, regular dental checkups and periodontal examinations are very important. Your medical history identifies conditions or risk factors that may contribute to gum disease. Your gums will be examined for inflammation and a dental tool called a probe will measure any pockets around your teeth. In a healthy mouth, pockets measure between 1 and 3 millimeters. A reading of 4 millimeters or higher could be a sign of inflammation or bone loss. An x-ray can determine if there is any bone loss. You may be referred to a periodontist, an expert in diagnosing and treating gum disease, who can provide treatment options that are not offered by your dentist.²

Treatment

The main goal of treatment is to control the infection. Treatment methods depend upon the type of gum disease and how it has progressed. Good dental care at home helps keep periodontal disease from becoming more serious or recurring. Changing certain behaviors, such as quitting smoking, may be suggested to improve treatment results.

Helpful Tips

For a lifetime of healthy smiles, brush your teeth twice a day with a fluoride toothpaste and clean between teeth daily with dental floss or a special brush, wooden or plastic pick, or a “water flosser” recommended by a dental professional. Visit the dentist at least every six months for a check-up and professional cleaning. Eat a balanced diet and never start smoking or using chewing tobacco. Electronic cigarettes (vape pen, e-hookah, hookah pen) are unsafe and not a healthy alternative to traditional tobacco products. If you smoke or use tobacco in any form, quit to improve your oral health and your overall health.

For more information

For more information, contact the Division of Public Health, Bureau of Oral Health and Dental Services, at 302-622-4540 and www.dhss.delaware.gov/dhss/dph/hsm/ohphome.html.

Resources

1. American Dental Association. 2020. Gum Disease. In Mouth Healthy. Retrieved July 16, 2020 from: <http://www.mouthhealthy.org/en/az-topics/g/gum-disease>
2. National Institute of Dental and Craniofacial Research. September 2013. Periodontal (Gum) Disease: Causes, Symptoms, and Treatments. Retrieved July 16, 2020 from: <https://www.nidcr.nih.gov/health-info/gum-disease/more-info>

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