

Periodontal (gum) diseases

What are they?

The common forms of gum disease begin with plaque, a soft, sticky substance that builds up on your teeth. Plaque is mostly made up of bacteria, which feed on sugar from food and drink. Tartar, formed by hardened plaque, helps plaque to gather and makes it harder to remove.

If plaque is allowed to build up, the bacteria in it can make your gums sore and infected; they will look red and puffy, and they will probably bleed when you brush your teeth. This is the first stage of gum disease – gingivitis.

The gum will then start to become detached from the tooth, forming 'pockets' in which more plaque can gather – and bone supporting the tooth will slowly be lost. This is the second stage of gum disease – chronic periodontitis. Because this process is usually painless, it can become very bad without you noticing. If left unchecked, gum disease will lead to loosening and loss of teeth.

Symptoms to watch out for are:

- gums that have come away from teeth;
- pus between the teeth and gums;
- persistent bad breath or a bad taste;
- permanent teeth that are loose or are changing position.



Gingivitis can be cured with good mouth hygiene – brushing twice a day and using other mouth hygiene aids, such as floss and, occasionally, medicated mouthwash, as advised by your dentist or hygienist.

Scaling and polishing by a dentist or hygienist can remove tartar. This will help you to keep your mouth clean.

In more severe cases of gum disease, root planing (deep cleaning below the gumline by a dentist or hygienist) may be necessary. In some cases, surgery is required, with the gum being peeled away, under local anaesthetic, to allow affected areas to be treated.

If gum disease has progressed too far, the tooth or teeth involved will have to be removed.

Who gets gum disease?

Gum disease can start when you are a child, but chronic periodontitis is normally only a problem for adults.

Some people are more likely to have periodontal disease than others:

- Crooked teeth are more difficult to keep clean, so the gums supporting such teeth might be more prone to gum disease.
- Smoking makes gum disease considerably worse. Quitting smoking is essential to your general and mouth health.
- Certain drugs and medicines can affect your gums: ask your dentist about these.
- Diabetes and some other diseases reduce people's resistance to gum disease. People who have these conditions need to be particularly careful about their mouth hygiene.
- Already existing gum disease can be worsened by hormonal changes, due to pregnancy or oral contraceptives ('the pill'). Here again, good hygiene is important.

Eating a healthy diet with plenty of fruits and vegetables helps resist gum diseases.