

What is gum disease?

Stories often appear in the news about the association between oral health—specifically gum disease—and overall health conditions, such as diabetes or stroke. But what is gum disease exactly?

WHAT CAUSES GUM DISEASE?

The condition you may refer to as “gum disease” also is called “periodontal disease.” Periodontal disease is an inflammation of the gums that, if severe, can lead to the loss of the tissues that hold your teeth in place. It is caused by plaque, a sticky film of bacteria that forms constantly on teeth. You can remove plaque by brushing twice a day and cleaning between your teeth daily. If plaque is not removed, it can cause your gums (gingivae) to pull away from your teeth, forming pockets in which more bacteria can collect. Plaque that is not removed also hardens into calculus along and under your gums. The pockets and hard calculus make it difficult to remove plaque without help from a dentist, and periodontal disease can develop. If left untreated, periodontal disease can damage the tissues that support your teeth, even the bone.

WHAT WILL HAPPEN IF I DEVELOP PERIODONTAL DISEASE?

Symptoms of periodontal disease include

- gums that are red and swollen and bleed easily (for example, when you brush or clean between your teeth);
- gums that seem to have pulled away from the teeth;
- constant bad breath;
- pus between your teeth and gums;
- teeth that seem to be loose or moving away from one another;
- change in the way your teeth fit together when you bite;
- change in the way your partial dentures fit.

There are various stages to periodontal disease—from gingivitis (early stage) to periodontitis (advanced disease). Red and swollen gums that bleed easily are a sign of gingivitis. At this early stage, the disease may be reversed with a professional cleaning and more regular daily care at home. During the cleaning, the dentist or dental hygienist will use a special tool to

scrape the hardened calculus and plaque from along and beneath your gum line. More advanced forms of the disease require cleanings that go more deeply below the gum line. Sometimes, the dentist will refer you to a specialist—a periodontist—for these cleanings.

HOW CAN I PREVENT PERIODONTAL DISEASE?

To prevent periodontal disease:

- brush your teeth twice a day;
- clean between your teeth with floss or another interdental cleaner once every day;
- visit your dentist for a checkup and professional cleaning regularly;
- show your dentist or dental hygienist how you brush and clean between your teeth and ask if you can make any improvements.

If you smoke or chew tobacco, stop. Tobacco use increases the risk of developing periodontal disease.

Researchers have reported associations between periodontal disease and a host of other conditions. (Keep in mind that an association does not mean that one disease causes the other. It means that one disease or condition tends to appear at the same time as the other.) For example, studies have shown that people with diabetes tend to have periodontal disease more often than those without diabetes, and often the disease is more severe than that in other people. Researchers also have found that some people with diabetes who receive treatment for periodontal disease see improvements in their ability to control blood sugar levels after those treatments.¹

So keep in mind that your daily oral health routine and professional dental care are more than just taking care of your teeth. They are important steps in taking care of yourself. ■

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“For the Dental Patient” provides general information on dental treatments to dental patients. It is designed to prompt discussion between dentist and patient about treatment options and does not substitute for the dentist’s professional assessment based on the individual patient’s needs and desires.

1. Teeuw WJ, Gerdes VE, Loos BG. Effect of periodontal treatment on glyemic control of diabetic patients: a systematic review and meta-analysis. *Diabetes Care* 2010;33(2):421-427.