

# Are my gums healthy?



Advice on gum disease and its prevention

## What is gum disease?

Gum disease is an inflammatory disease affecting the tissues surrounding your teeth. You may have no obvious symptoms, yet gum disease is a common cause of tooth loss in adults.

Around 80% of adults suffer from some type of gum disease. <sup>(1)</sup>

At an early stage the disease involves only the soft gum tissue and is called gingivitis.

The gums react to bacterial plaque left on the tooth surfaces which may make the gums red and swollen. If left untreated the disease can spread to the bone that holds your teeth in and is known as periodontitis. At this stage of the disease the teeth can become loose, the gums may recede and deep gaps may form between the teeth and gums.

## Is gum disease painful?

In most cases gum disease is not painful, which means it can go unnoticed by the patient. Because of this, it is important to visit your dentist or dental hygienist regularly to have your gum health checked.

## What causes gum disease?

Plaque (biofilm) is a mixture of bacteria, bacterial waste products and food.

Plaque can build up on your teeth, particularly with inadequate cleaning. When left undisturbed, it can irritate your gums (the gingiva) and trigger an inflammatory response.

Plaque that is not removed hardens to form tartar (calculus), which can make it more difficult to keep the area clean.

When plaque and tartar build up, pockets of space form between teeth and gums and the bone structures around your teeth gradually become affected. In time the pockets get deeper and increasingly more difficult to clean – the gum and bone start to detach from the roots of the tooth. This is periodontitis and may result in tooth loss.

Gum disease may be hereditary or stem from underlying medical conditions. There are many medical and social conditions that can affect how your body responds to bacterial plaque.

## What are the signs of gum disease?

The first sign is usually bleeding from the gums when you brush your teeth (people who smoke may not experience bleeding gums). Your gums may be red and swollen and you may have bad breath and an unpleasant metallic taste in your mouth.



Healthy Teeth

The gums completely fill the space between the teeth and do not bleed when touched. Gums are pale pink in colour.



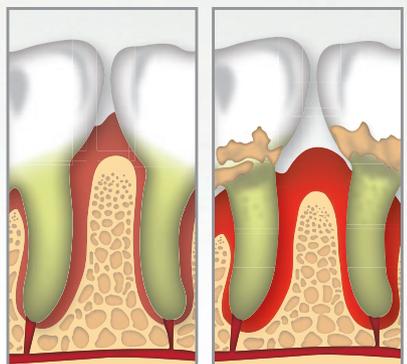
Periodontitis

Gums are not firmly attached to the teeth and may recede. Teeth often become loose. The gums are swollen and red with possible bleeding, pus or discharge around the gums.



Gingivitis

Inflamed gums are red and swollen and bleed easily when touched.



Healthy gums

Periodontitis

## Can gum disease be prevented?

Gum disease occurs when teeth (and gums) are not cleaned properly, allowing build-up of plaque. Preventing gum disease involves reducing the amount of **plaque and tartar** on your teeth.

You should visit your dentist or hygienist regularly and follow a planned oral care programme at home.

Your dentist or hygienist can show you the correct way to clean your mouth and how to best clean between your teeth. They may show you how to **brush, floss or use interdental brushes**. Most people need to have a professional removal of plaque and tartar from difficult to reach areas in the mouth.

Be aware that lifestyle or medical factors can increase your risk of gum disease:

- Smoking reduces blood flow to the gums and slows healing. Smokers are up to 6 times more likely to lose bone around their teeth <sup>(2)</sup>
- People with diabetes are more likely to develop periodontal disease than people without diabetes <sup>(3)</sup>
- Hormonal changes such as in pregnancy can increase sensitivity to bacteria
- Stress and genetics can also have an effect on gum disease



# healthy gums

## - what should I look for?

Healthy gums are a pale pink colour, firm and do not bleed after brushing or eating.

Your teeth should not be loose or easily separated from the gum.



## **I think I have gum disease – what should I do?**

Book in at your dentist or hygienist for a thorough check-up of your teeth and gums. Your dentist or hygienist will make an assessment of the progress of the disease. If you have gingivitis your hygienist or dentist will clean your teeth (a process known as scaling and polishing) and may use ultrasonics, hand instruments and air polishing devices. They also may recommend some changes to your oral hygiene routine. If gum disease has progressed to periodontitis, you may require more extensive scaling to remove plaque and tartar from the pockets that have formed. Your dentist or hygienist will monitor pocket depth over several appointments to make sure treatment is successful.

## **Is periodontal disease curable?**

No, but it can be controlled with effective home care and regular visits to the dental team. Further bone loss can be slowed and may stop altogether. So, two minutes of brushing and using something to clean between your teeth every morning and evening is time well spent (4). Remember to replace your toothbrush regularly; at least every three months (5).

## **Are treatments available to help control periodontal disease?**

If your gum disease is more serious, the pockets may need more attention from a specialist.

A number of treatment options are available (including surgery) depending on how far the disease has advanced. In addition to scaling and root debridement, treatments include the use of locally applied antimicrobial gel, systemic antibiotics, antimicrobial chips, lasers and scaling with medicated solutions.

Your dentist or hygienist will assess how far the disease has progressed and recommend the appropriate treatment(s) to control and stabilise your condition.

## **Is there really a link between chronic periodontitis and cardiovascular diseases?**

There has been extensive research carried out on the links between systemic disease and gum disease. Red, swollen and bleeding gums may point to other health problems that range from heart disease to diabetes. Bacteria from your mouth can get into and travel through your bloodstream, setting off inflammatory reactions elsewhere in your body. Left untreated, gum disease can increase your risk of developing a host of diseases linked to inflammation.

**Help look after  
your teeth** and gums  
by using products to clean  
between your teeth and  
brushing twice daily.



## WAREHOUSE

This information leaflet has been provided by

\*Optident Wholesale Warehouse,  
International Development Centre, Valley Drive, Ilkley,  
West Yorkshire LS29 8AL

T: +44 (0)1943 605 050

Fax: +44 1943 886 838

[www.owwarehouse.co.uk](http://www.owwarehouse.co.uk)

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- (1) The 2009 Adult Dental Health Survey (ADHS). <http://www.ic.nhs.uk/statistics-and-data-collections/primary-care/dentistry/adult-dental-health-survey-2009--summary-report-and-thematic-series>. Accessed 12 April 2011
- (2) Rosa EF. (2011), A prospective 12-month study of the effect of smoking cessation on periodontal clinical parameters. *Journal of Clinical Periodontology* 38 (6):562-71.
- (3) Chapple, ILC., et al. (2013), Diabetes and periodontal diseases: consensus report of the Joint EFP/AAP Workshop on Periodontitis and Systemic Diseases. *Journal of Clinical Periodontology* 40: S106-S112.
- (4) Delivering better oral health: an evidence-based toolkit for prevention. Third edition.
- (5) ADA and Council on Scientific Affairs, November 2011