

# Preventing Gum Disease

Periodontal (gum) disease will afflict three out of four adults over the age of 35, and it is a major cause of tooth loss. Periodontal disease involves the inflammation and infection of the supporting soft and hard tissue surrounding the teeth.

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In the early stages, gum disease is called gingivitis and is characterized by redness, swelling, tenderness and bleeding. At this point the symptoms can be alleviated and the tissue returned to normal by daily flossing and brushing. If the process is allowed to continue, it may advance to periodontitis, which is characterized by the loss of the tissue attachment to the teeth, a downward migration of the tissue and bone loss (pocketing). With the loss of its supporting structure, a tooth will become loose and fall out or have to be removed by the dentist.

There are various factors that contribute to gum disease. Allowing plaque (a sticky mixture of bacteria, food and debris) to accumulate on the teeth is the primary factor. The bacteria will produce toxins (poisons) that attack and destroy the tissue fibers that attach the gums to the teeth (gingival attachment). Eventually, the plaque will calcify and harden. When this happens, it can only be removed by a professional prophylaxis (cleaning).

Periodontal infections become worse and progress more rapidly in people who have additional risk factors. People who smoke; are under great stress; have uncontrolled diabetes; consume alcohol in excessive amounts; have a systemic disease like leukemia that interferes with the immune system and/or have untreated tooth-related dental problems are at a higher risk for gum disease.

## **Warning Signs**

Warning signs and symptoms include; bleeding gums when you brush or floss; pus between the tooth and gum; gums that pull away from the teeth; chronic bad breath; tenderness; swelling; and loose teeth. If you are experiencing any number of these symptoms, talk to your dentist. If diagnosed and treated early on, the condition can be completely reversible.

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## **Prevention**

Having a professional examination twice a year and flossing and brushing daily will minimize your risk. Eating a balanced diet, especially foods rich in vitamin C, B12, folic acid and calcium, will help strengthen your gums and bones against breakdown. Also, limit the frequency of eating foods loaded with refined sugar (sucrose). Other risk factors such as smoking should be eliminated, and related dental problems such as crowded teeth, spaces and cavities should be restored.

## **Treatment**

If caught early, a professional scaling and root planing to remove plaque and calculus can be performed. This may be supplemented with chemotherapeutic agents and/or antibiotics. Daily maintenance of flossing and brushing is critical.

More advanced periodontitis usually requires surgery in which the gum tissue is cut and the bony pockets are reduced and contoured. Soft and hard tissue grafting procedures may be used to add or grow new tissue.

Although there are some inherited tendencies to developing periodontal disease, it can be easily prevented in most individuals with a little time and effort.