

What is gum disease?

Gum disease is one of the most common dental diseases in the world. It has been estimated that 98% of the population will suffer from it at some stage in their lives. In the old days, gum disease was called **pyorrhea**, and if you were diagnosed with it, you were recommended to have all your teeth out. Thankfully, these days dentists take a more conservative view, and a diagnosis of gum disease nowadays is no longer nearly as serious.

What are the different kinds of gum disease?

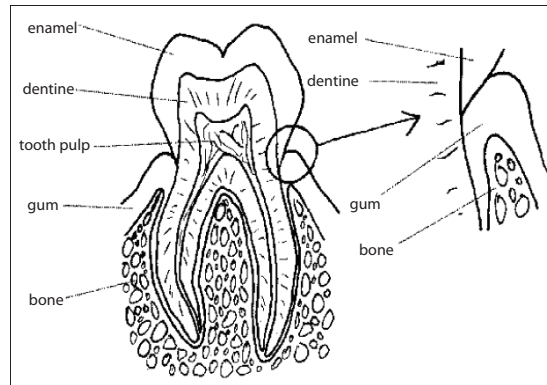
There are two main kinds of gum disease - **gingivitis**, which affects the gums only, and **periodontitis**, which affects the tissues, such as bone, which lie underneath the gums. Gingivitis can progress into periodontitis, and vice versa.

What does it look like?

Healthy gums look pink and firm. They have a "stippled" appearance. Gums which are suffering from gingivitis or periodontitis are redder, and have a shiny, puffy appearance. They are softer, as well. They blanch when you press them with your finger, and may bleed then too. The gums may be drawn back from the teeth and a bad smell and/or taste may be present.

How does it work?

To fully understand how gum disease works, we'll need to take a quick look at the structure of the tooth. The picture below shows a normal, healthy tooth, in normal healthy gums.



You can see from the diagram that there is a little crevice between the tooth and the gums. It's very easy for us to miss that little crevice when we are brushing, so plaque builds up there. If the plaque lies there for a little while, it hardens into tartar, which you can't remove with a toothbrush because it's too hard.

The plaque irritates the gums - after all, plaque is a sticky mass of bacteria, so it's pretty horrible stuff!



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Gums

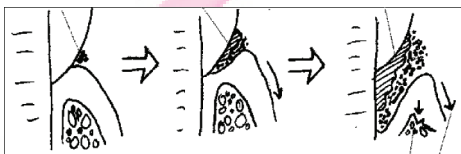
The Good, The Bad and The Bleeding

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Gum disease

You know when this has happened, because the gums go red and bleed very easily. This situation is **gingivitis**, and its reversible.

Some people are more prone to the build-up of tartar than others, and in these people, gingivitis can easily progress into **periodontitis**. As the tartar continues to form, the gums and bone decide that they don't like it. They start to recede away from the point of irritation. This is **gum recession**. When the gum recedes, it forms a flap, which makes it harder than ever to remove the plaque, and a vicious circle is formed. You can see how periodontitis proceeds from the diagram below.



- Plaque builds up between tooth and gum
- Older plaque hardens into tartar, the gum recedes and new plaque collects
- More tartar is laid down, and this encourages more plaque. Both gum and bone recede - if this continues the tooth becomes wobbly, and may be lost.

Periodontitis isn't reversible, that is, your gums won't grow back again. But as long as it can be controlled, it won't get any worse.

What can we do to prevent it?

The first and most basic step in the prevention of gum disease is to stop plaque building up in the first place. Always brush your teeth gently but thoroughly at **least twice** a day.

Don't press too hard when you're brushing - this will scratch your gums. Always use a soft toothbrush and make sure you clean every single surface of every single tooth, in particular pay attention to where the gum meets the tooth.

Using dental floss will get rid of plaque where the toothbrush can't reach - that is, between the teeth. Some people find floss a bit tricky to use - if you're having problems, ask the dentist or hygienist.

If you're one of those people who builds tartar (and most of us are), then it's a good idea to have your teeth scaled regularly. Scaling is when the hygienist or dentist removes the tartar from your teeth. Because tartar is so hard, you can't really do this yourself at home, although tartar control toothpaste may help slow build up.

If your gums bleed when you brush, you're not quite reaching the plaque. Angle the toothbrush bristles towards the gums and brush top and bottom teeth individually. During pregnancy, your gums over-react to any plaque, so most women find their gums bleed during pregnancy.

Smoking impairs the blood supply to the gums. This makes the gums much more fragile and prone to damage. Also because the blood supply is reduced, you may not notice the gums bleeding, and thus would miss your first warning sign. Smokers also seem to build up more tartar - this could be because the smoke has a drying effect on the plaque making it go harder quicker. If you smoke, then it is most important for you to brush properly, and to keep up regular checkups.

What can we do to prevent it?

Some children do get tartar build-up, and gum disease, although it is much rarer in kids than in adults. It tends to start in the early teens, although it *can* start earlier. So long as you practice good toothbrushing, problems should be minimal.

Are there any other forms of gum disease?

Apart from the conditions described, which are very common, there are some very rare forms of gum disease. These often attack people with really clean mouths, and are quite tricky to treat. However, they are thankfully extremely rare.

What about mouthwashes?

There are loads of new mouthwashes appearing these days. Some claim to be effective against gum disease, some against decay, some against plaque. You will know if you have read our decay leaflet as well that plaque causes both gum disease *and* decay. Sadly, there doesn't seem to be one mouthwash which completely blitzes plaque, although they may help.

Mouthwashes containing Chlorhexidine kill the bacteria in plaque, rendering them less harmful. Unfortunately, these mouthwashes can stain your teeth, so they should be used with caution. However, along with careful brushing and flossing, they can form part of an oral hygiene routine that should see you keeping your teeth and gums in a good healthy condition.