

Gums Need Love, Too

Teeth may be the stars of our mouths, but without a strong supporting cast of gums, where would our teeth be? Gums support, stabilize, and protect teeth. Unhealthy or diseased gums can lead to damage and even loss of otherwise healthy teeth.

What is gum disease?

Gum, or “periodontal,” disease is more common than you might think. It is estimated that 80 percent of American adults may have gum disease. Gum disease starts with a buildup of plaque, a sticky film that is constantly forming on our teeth. Plaque is caused by the bacteria that live in our mouths. If it is not cleaned off regularly, it hardens into a substance called tartar that needs to be removed by a dental hygienist or dentist. Bacteria, plaque, and tartar cause tooth decay, but they also build up below the gum line, irritating and damaging the soft tissue.

There are 2 stages of gum disease. Gingivitis is the early stage—you’ve probably heard it mentioned in commercials for toothpaste and mouthwash. If you have gingivitis, your gums may be swollen and red and they may bleed easily. The later, more serious, stage of the disease is called periodontitis. The gums begin to pull away from the teeth and pockets of infection form in the spaces. These begin to destroy the bone and connective tissue that hold the teeth in place. If not treated, the teeth will become loose and fall out or need to be removed.

Can gum disease be prevented?

Yes! The good news is that you can help prevent gum disease! Since gum disease starts with plaque, keeping your mouth clean is the best protection:

- Brush your teeth 2 times each day
- Floss your teeth every day
- Go to the dentist regularly to get a professional cleaning

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Are some people at greater risk for gum disease?

Yes. Certain behaviors or health conditions can increase your risk for gum disease:

- Smoking—one more good reason to quit!
- Diabetes
- Pregnancy or other hormonal changes
- Medications that cause “dry mouth”
- Crooked teeth, defective fillings, or bridges or dentures that don’t fit well

What are the symptoms of gum disease?

One of the problems with gum disease is that you may not notice symptoms until the disease is severe. However, any of the following may be signs of gum disease:

- Bad breath that does not go away
- Red, swollen, or tender gums
- Bleeding gums
- Gums that pull away or recede from your teeth
- Painful chewing
- Sensitive teeth
- Loose teeth
- Changes in the way your teeth fit together
- Changes in the way your partial dentures or bridges fit

If you notice any of these symptoms, visit your dentist. There are treatments that can stop or reverse gum disease. The sooner it is treated, the less likely it is to cause long-term damage to your mouth and teeth. If you need help finding a dentist, call PrimeWest Health Member Services at **1-866-431-0801** (toll free).

Sources: American Dental Association (ADA), Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), National Institute of Dental and Craniofacial Research (NIDCR)



1-866-431-0801 (toll free); TTY 1-800-627-3529 or 711

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