Gum disease

This fact sheet explains the two most common forms of gum disease: gingivitis and periodontitis.

What is gingivitis?

Gingivitis is inflammation that affects the gums only. Plaque causes the gums to become red, swollen and tender. The gums bleed easily when you brush.

Gingivitis is reversible, however, if it is not treated, it may lead to the more serious condition of periodontitis.

What is periodontitis?

Periodontitis is a severe and irreversible form of gum disease. Periodontitis causes a deep inflammation of the gums that affects the bone holding the teeth in place. Periodontitis usually progresses slowly and is often painless.

If left untreated, periodontitis may destroy the attachment that holds the tooth in the bone leaving a space or ‘pocket’ where more bacteria can collect and cause permanent bone loss. The teeth loosen and may eventually be lost.

What are the signs of gum disease?

Common signs of gum disease include:

- bleeding gums when you brush your teeth
- bad breath or a bad taste in your mouth
- redness and swelling
- gums that are receding
- sensitive teeth, and/or
- loose teeth.

What causes gum disease?

The major cause of gum disease is bacterial plaque. This colourless, sticky film contains millions of bacteria, and constantly forms on teeth. As you age, your teeth are more at risk from gum disease than other conditions.

Factors that contribute to gum disease

- Plaque that is not removed daily may build up and harden to form dental calculus (tartar). Calculus builds up above and below the gums and cannot be removed by a toothbrush. If calculus is present, the teeth cannot be properly cleaned.
- Poorly shaped fillings, partial dentures, crowns and bridges can make it very difficult to remove plaque.
- Some conditions can make existing periodontitis worse (eg. pregnancy, diabetes and immune disorders).
- Smoking makes periodontitis worse and may camouflage the problem by reducing blood supply to the gums.

What should I do to minimise the risk of gum disease?

- Brush and floss every day to remove plaque.
- Partial dentures need to be carefully designed and should only be made after periodontitis has been treated. In most cases, partial dentures should not be worn while sleeping.
- Visit your dental professional regularly. Your dental professional will help you develop an effective tooth cleaning method and remove calculus from around the tooth and from the root surface (scaling). Professional cleaning is a fundamental part of treating any gum disease. Treatment may need to be completed over a number of appointments. Treatment should not be postponed.
Long-term success can be achieved through a combination of daily plaque removal at home and regular monitoring and cleaning by your dental professional.

Remember

- Teeth are meant to last a lifetime. Tooth loss due to gum disease is not an inevitable result of ageing.
- Effective daily plaque removal and professional tooth cleaning will prevent and/or control gum disease.
- Visit your dental professional regularly for check-ups and preventive care.

For more information

- Contact your dental professional
- Call 13 HEALTH (13 43 25 84) for confidential health advice 24 hours a day, seven days a week
- Email oral_health@health.qld.gov.au.