

Gum disease

Gum disease affects most people at some time during their life. It is usually caused by a build-up of plaque on teeth. One of the common signs of gum disease is bleeding gums. Meticulous cleaning of your teeth each day can help prevent gum disease.

Getting treatment for dental problems early can help save teeth that are at risk from gum disease and other conditions. See your dentist if you have swollen or bleeding gums or loose teeth.

The different stages of gum disease

There are two main stages of gum disease:

- Gingivitis
- Periodontitis.

Gingivitis

Gingivitis is early gum disease and occurs when dental plaque builds up on teeth, particularly where the gum joins the tooth. The signs of gingivitis are bleeding, redness and swelling of the gum.

Periodontitis

Periodontitis is an advanced gum disease that may occur if gingivitis is not treated. The gum margin – the part of the gum that seals to the tooth – is weakened. Bacteria and their products cause more inflammation (redness and swelling) in the parts of the mouth that sit below the gum margin. These structures include the covering of the tooth root (cementum), the bone and the fibres that connect the cementum to the bone (periodontal ligament).

As the disease progresses and bone is lost, spaces begin to form between the tooth and the gum. These spaces are called 'periodontal pockets'. Signs of periodontitis include bleeding, swelling and receding gums together with bad breath, a bad taste in the mouth and loose teeth.

Cleaning teeth can help prevent gum disease

You should clean your teeth carefully every day with a soft, small-headed toothbrush. The area where the gum meets the tooth should especially be cleaned to ensure the gum tissue and supporting structure remains healthy. The careful use of dental floss between teeth also assists in removal of plaque.

While it is tempting to avoid cleaning your gums when they are inflamed and bleeding, brushing will help improve the situation.

Seek dental care

As with so many conditions, early intervention to treat gum diseases can ensure the survival of your teeth. If you have swollen or bleeding gums or your teeth feel loose, see your dentist.

The dentist will examine your gums with a probe to check on the tightness of the gums to your teeth. If necessary, the dentist will instruct you in tooth cleaning techniques or may clean your teeth professionally to remove any plaque and calculus (hardened plaque).

In an emergency, (if you have swelling of the face, severe bleeding or injury as a result of an accident), it is important to seek treatment immediately from a dental hospital, community dental clinic or the emergency department of your nearest hospital.

Where to get help

- Your local dentist or other oral health professional
- Your closest community dental clinic Tel. 1300 360 054 – to find a clinic near you

- ADAVB Dental Consumer Helpline Tel. (03) 8825 4600 9am to 5pm, Monday to Friday
- Royal Dental Hospital Melbourne Clinic Tel. (03) 9341 1000 or 1800 833 039 8am to 5pm, Monday to Friday
- Royal Dental Hospital Melbourne, Emergency Service Tel. (03) 9341 1040 8am to 9.15pm, Monday to Friday; 9am to 9.15pm, weekends and public holidays
- In an emergency, visit the Royal Dental Hospital Melbourne or your community dental clinic immediately – if these services are not available, contact the emergency department of your nearest hospital

Things to remember

- Gum disease affects most people at some stage in their life.
- The two stages of gum disease are gingivitis and periodontitis.
- Careful and regular cleaning can help prevent gum disease.
- Getting treatment early can help save teeth that are at risk from gum disease and other conditions – see your dentist if you have swollen or bleeding gums or loose teeth.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

Dental Health Services Victoria

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