

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. Careful and regular cleaning of your teeth and gums 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 or oral health professional 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 and spaces form between the tooth and the gum. These spaces are called 'periodontal pockets.' Bacteria and their products become trapped in these pockets causing further inflammation (redness and swelling).

The structures affected by periodontitis 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, larger spaces begin to form between the tooth and the gum. 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, especially along the gumline where the gum meets the tooth. This ensures the gum tissue and supporting structures remain 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

Like many conditions, early intervention to treat gum diseases can ensure the longevity of your teeth. If you have swollen or bleeding gums or your teeth feel loose, see your dentist or oral health professional.

The dentist or oral health professional will examine your gums with a probe to measure the spaces between the tooth and gum. This will determine the health of your gums and supporting structures. If necessary, the dentist or oral health professional 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 dentist or oral health professional
- Your public oral health service
- Community dental clinic Tel. 1300 360 054
- The Royal Dental Hospital Melbourne,
 - General dental enquiries Tel. (03) 9341 1000 or 1800 833 039 (from rural Victoria) Monday to Friday, 8:30am to 5pm.
 - Emergency Service Tel. 1300 360 054 Monday to Friday 8.30am to 9.15pm, weekends and public holidays 9am to 9.15pm
- Australian Dental Association Tel. (03) 8825 4600

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 or oral health professional 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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