

Talking with Patients

Gingival Recession

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WHAT IS IT?

Teeth are supported by surrounding gingival tissues (gums) and underlying bone. The gum tissue typically is attached at the “neck” of the tooth, leaving the enamel-covered crown exposed. Gingival recession is the migration of the gum tissue away from the crown portion of the tooth, resulting in exposure of the root surface. Root surfaces are softer and more susceptible to wear and decay than the enamel-covered crown; therefore, gingival recession can prompt root caries (decay) and/or noncarious root defects (notches at the gum line in the neck of the tooth), in addition to increased dental sensitivity. Gingival recession is often a generalized condition but can sometimes be limited to a single tooth or a group of teeth.

A slow but continuous progression of gingival recession usually occurs naturally with age. This is called physiologic gingival recession. However, gingival recession also can be caused and accelerated by periodontal disease, which results mainly from poor oral hygiene (see *Talking with Patients*, “Periodontal Disease,” Volume 17, Number 1). Advanced gingival recession in the presence of periodontal disease and bone loss can compromise the tooth’s stability by lessening the periodontal support. Other causes

of gingival recession include thin or fragile gums, overly aggressive toothbrushing, bite problems, and malposed (poorly positioned) teeth.

HOW IS IT DIAGNOSED AND TREATED?

The diagnosis of gingival recession is relatively simple: the receding gums can be noted visually upon dental examination. Of greater importance is the cause of the gingival recession because the treatment depends on the specific cause.

Physiologic gingival recession, with an otherwise healthy periodontium, requires no treatment except for proper oral hygiene and regular professional maintenance. Fluoride varnish may be applied to exposed root surfaces to help prevent root caries or dental sensitivity. Gingival recession that is caused by aggressive toothbrushing can be prevented by using a soft-bristle toothbrush and the proper toothbrushing technique. When gingival recession occurs secondary to another condition, such as periodontal disease, bite problems, or malposed teeth, the primary cause must be treated before addressing the resulting recession.

Gingival recession is a relatively irreversible phenomenon; that is, once receded, the gums will not grow back. However, in very spe-

cific cases and in the absence of active periodontal disease, the exposed areas of teeth affected by gingival recession can be covered with gingival grafts.

CONCLUSIONS

Gingival recession is a condition in which the gums progressively recede from the crown portion of the teeth, exposing their roots. The causes of gingival recession vary from natural or physiologic gingival recession to gingival recession associated with periodontal disease or other adverse factors. If you suspect you have gingival recession and have never discussed it with your dentist or dental hygienist, ask about it at your next dental visit. As with periodontal disease, the best strategy to deal with gingival recession is to prevent it by using proper oral hygiene habits and by visiting your dentist regularly.

The following photograph shows teeth affected by gingival recession.



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