

Talking with Patients

Periodontal Disease

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WHAT IS IT?

Periodontal disease, also referred to as gum disease, is a chronic infection that affects the gum and bone tissues around the teeth. When left untreated, periodontal disease can lead to tooth loss. The primary cause of the infection is bacteria present in the dental plaque, although many aggravating factors also play a role in the onset and progression of the disease.

In the initial stage of periodontal disease, called *gingivitis*, the gums appear red and bleed easily upon brushing and flossing. In spite of the inflammation, there might not be any associated discomfort. Gingivitis is often caused by poor oral hygiene. When untreated, gingivitis can progress into *periodontitis*, a more advanced stage of periodontal disease in which the bone supporting the teeth also is affected. In periodontitis, pockets might form between the teeth and gums, undermining the support of the teeth and creating sites for bacteria accumulation and further infection. Dental plaque around teeth and within the dental pockets can also calcify over time, forming hard deposits called calculus that attach firmly to the tooth and cannot be removed by brushing and flossing. Like gingivitis, periodontitis is a

slow-progressing and relatively painless disease.

HOW IS IT DIAGNOSED AND TREATED?

Periodontal disease can be diagnosed and treated by your dentist during a routine oral examination. A radiographic examination might also help reveal any bone loss present owing to periodontitis.

Gingivitis can be reversed by improving brushing and flossing to mechanically keep the plaque off the teeth and gums, in addition to regular professional maintenance. Approved mouthrinses (chlorhexidine and essential oils) and dentifrices (triclosan and stannous fluoride) may be used in conjunction with brushing and flossing to reduce plaque and gingivitis levels.

Periodontitis requires more complex treatment, the extent of which depends on the magnitude of the disease. Mild periodontitis can be

treated with a deep cleaning called “scaling and root planing,” which involves removal of the deposits and smoothing the root surfaces at infected pockets. Moderate to advanced periodontitis may require additional treatment such as gum surgery, antibiotics (local or systemic), and/or “host modulatory” (collagen protective) agents.

CONCLUSIONS

Periodontal disease is a chronic oral infection that affects the gums and bone tissues around the tooth. Although the primary cause of the disease is bacterial infection, the onset and progression of periodontal disease can be influenced by conditions such as diabetes, genetics, pregnancy, puberty, stress, medications, smoking/tobacco use, alcohol use, poor nutrition, and systemic disorders that affect the body’s immune system. Periodontal disease can be diagnosed and treated by your dentist.

The preceding photograph shows an example of teeth affected by periodontal disease. Note the swollen aspect of the gums and a cavity that is present between the front teeth.



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