

Gum Disease

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What is Gum Disease?

Gum disease is a generic name used to describe inflammatory diseases in the support structures of the teeth (i.e. the gingiva, periodontal ligament and bone)

There are two main degrees of gum disease; gingivitis and periodontitis.

You have been given this sheet because you are showing signs or symptoms of some form of gum disease.

Gingivitis

Most adults suffer from gingivitis somewhere in their mouth at some point in their life. Gingivitis is an inflammation of the gingival tissues (gums) that form the soft tissue 'cuff' around the teeth.

If plaque and calculus are allowed to build up on the teeth close to the gums the bacteria that make up the plaque (and their waste products) irritate the gums causing an inflammatory reaction that results in mild swelling and redness. These areas often bleed when touched (i.e. brushed or flossed or cleaned)

If treated early gingivitis is usually totally reversible. If the source of the irritation (i.e. the plaque and calculus) is removed the inflammation resolves. This can be achieved by brushing and flossing at home and supplemented by 1 or 2 professional cleans per year.

Periodontal disease

Periodontal disease is a much more serious form of gum disease than gingivitis. Periodontal disease is a very complex topic that is currently the target of a lot of interesting research. The ramifications of periodontal disease are now thought to spread far beyond the mouth.

If the plaque that causes gingivitis is left untreated it starts to harden into calculus (tartar) due to absorbing calcium ions from saliva. This creates an ideal growth substrate for further bacterial colonization. This in turn increases the gingival inflammation starting to create pockets down the side of the teeth.

These pockets in turn become even more ideal growth sites for bacteria and are much harder to clean as well. The bacteria that favour these pockets are often particularly virulent and gingivitis starts to progress into periodontitis which is the inflammation and destruction of the ligaments and bone that support the teeth.

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The progress to periodontal disease however is not that straightforward. Some individuals can accumulate quite a lot of plaque and calculus but do not easily progress onto periodontal disease. Other people need very little plaque or tartar build up but rapidly progress to quite aggressive periodontal disease. Most people lie somewhere between these two extremes.

It is now known periodontal disease involves a substantial genetic component and can be seen almost as an autoimmune disease. In certain individuals the bodies own over aggressive response to the bacterial invasion actually causes most of the tissue destruction.

As such periodontal disease cannot be 'cured' but it can be successfully managed. To avoid the bodies aggressive response, the stimulus (i.e. the plaque and calculus), needs to be strictly controlled. This means meticulous oral hygiene and up to 4 professional cleans a year, sometimes under local anaesthetic, to allow deeper scaling. Often a specialist periodontist can be involved in the management/treatment.

Failure to control the disease leads to progressive 'shrinking' of the gums and bone loss leading to loose teeth and eventually pain and tooth loss.

Recent research has also shown untreated periodontal disease may be associated with low weight premature babies, increased risk of heart attack, and predispose to diabetes or make established diabetes harder to manage. With this research data, clearly management of periodontal disease becomes even more important!

What can I do?

By keeping regular recall appointments StKildadentist can treat early gingivitis and help prevent it developing into the more serious periodontal disease. Also, we can detect if periodontal disease is present and formulate an appropriate treatment plan. Periodontal disease is often not painful until the very late stages. By the time you have associated gum abscesses and loose teeth it is too late!

Your dentist or hygienist will discuss appropriate oral hygiene strategies.

More information on the condition(s) can also be found at :
www.perio.org/consumer/2a.html

