



# Gum Disease

## Understanding Gingivitis and Periodontitis

### Why Gum Health Matters

Healthy gums provide the foundation for healthy teeth. They support and protect the tissues and bone that hold your teeth in place. When gums become inflamed or infected, they can no longer provide the support your teeth need.

Gum disease, also known as **periodontal disease**, is a common condition that affects millions of adults worldwide. In its early stages, it is often painless and may go unnoticed. Without treatment, however, gum disease can progress and lead to tooth loss and other oral health complications.

The good news is that most cases of gum disease are preventable through good oral hygiene, regular dental visits, and healthy lifestyle habits.

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## What Causes Gum Disease?

The primary cause of gum disease is **dental plaque**—a sticky film of bacteria that continuously forms on the teeth.

When plaque is not removed through daily brushing and cleaning between the teeth, it can harden into **tartar (calculus)**. Tartar creates a rough surface where additional bacteria can accumulate, increasing irritation and inflammation of the gums.

Several factors may increase the risk of developing gum disease, including:

- Poor oral hygiene
- Tobacco use or smoking
- Diabetes
- Hormonal changes (such as pregnancy or menopause)
- Certain medications that reduce saliva flow
- Dry mouth
- Family history of periodontal disease
- Poor nutrition
- Stress
- Weakened immune function

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# The Stages of Gum Disease

## Gingivitis

Gingivitis is the earliest stage of gum disease.

Common signs include:

- Red or swollen gums
- Bleeding during brushing or flossing
- Tender gums
- Persistent bad breath

At this stage, the infection affects only the gum tissue.

**The good news:** Gingivitis is usually reversible with improved oral hygiene and professional dental care.

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## Periodontitis

If gingivitis is left untreated, it may progress to periodontitis.

In periodontitis:

- The infection spreads below the gumline.
- The gums begin to pull away from the teeth.
- Pockets form between the teeth and gums.
- Bone supporting the teeth gradually breaks down.
- Teeth may loosen or eventually be lost.

Unlike gingivitis, damage caused by periodontitis cannot always be fully reversed, making early detection especially important.

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## Common Signs and Symptoms

Many people experience few symptoms during the early stages of gum disease.

Watch for:

- Bleeding gums
- Swollen or puffy gums
- Red or darkened gums
- Persistent bad breath
- Receding gums
- Teeth that appear longer than before
- Sensitive teeth
- Loose teeth
- Pain when chewing
- Changes in the way teeth fit together when biting

If you notice any of these symptoms, schedule a dental evaluation.

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## Who Is at Higher Risk?

Anyone can develop gum disease, but the risk is higher for people who:

- Smoke or use tobacco products
  - Have diabetes
  - Have poor plaque control
  - Skip regular dental visits
  - Have a family history of periodontal disease
  - Wear orthodontic appliances that are difficult to clean
  - Have certain chronic medical conditions
  - Experience dry mouth
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## How Is Gum Disease Diagnosed?

A dentist or dental hygienist may examine:

- Gum color and appearance
- Bleeding during examination
- Plaque and tartar buildup
- Pocket depth around each tooth
- Tooth mobility
- Dental X-rays to evaluate bone levels

Regular dental examinations allow gum disease to be detected before serious damage occurs.

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## Treatment

Treatment depends on the stage of the disease.

For **gingivitis**, treatment usually includes:

- Professional dental cleaning
- Improved brushing and flossing habits
- Better plaque control at home

For **periodontitis**, treatment may include:

- Scaling and root planing (deep cleaning)
- More frequent professional cleanings
- Antimicrobial therapy when appropriate
- Periodontal maintenance visits
- Surgical treatment in advanced cases

Your dental professional will recommend the treatment plan that best fits your individual needs.

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## How to Prevent Gum Disease

Most cases of gum disease can be prevented through consistent daily care.

Healthy habits include:

- Brush twice every day with fluoride toothpaste.
  - Clean between your teeth daily using floss or other interdental cleaners.
  - Visit your dentist regularly for examinations and professional cleanings.
  - Avoid smoking and other tobacco products.
  - Eat a balanced diet rich in fruits and vegetables.
  - Control medical conditions such as diabetes.
  - Replace your toothbrush every 3–4 months or sooner if the bristles become worn.
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# Gum Disease and Overall Health

Research continues to explore connections between gum disease and overall health. Studies have found associations between periodontal disease and certain systemic conditions, including diabetes and cardiovascular disease.

While these associations do not necessarily mean that gum disease directly causes these conditions, maintaining good oral health is considered an important part of overall health and well-being.

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## When Should You See a Dentist?

Schedule a dental visit if you notice:

- Bleeding gums that persist
- Swollen or painful gums
- Loose teeth
- Gum recession
- Persistent bad breath
- Pain when chewing

Early treatment offers the best chance of preventing permanent damage.

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## Key Takeaways

- ✓ Healthy gums are essential for healthy teeth.
  - ✓ Gum disease often begins without pain.
  - ✓ Bleeding gums are **not** considered normal and should not be ignored.
  - ✓ Gingivitis is usually reversible with good oral hygiene and professional care.
  - ✓ Untreated gum disease can lead to bone loss and tooth loss.
  - ✓ Daily brushing, cleaning between the teeth, and regular dental visits are the best ways to protect your gums.
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## References

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