

Q *What is Gum Disease?*

A The condition you may refer to as “gum disease” also is called “periodontal disease.” Periodontal disease is an inflammation of the gums that, if severe, can lead to the loss of the tissues that hold your teeth in place. It is caused by plaque, a sticky film of bacteria that forms constantly on teeth. You can remove plaque by brushing twice a day and cleaning between your teeth daily. If plaque is not removed, it can cause your gums (gingivae) to pull away from your teeth, forming pockets in which more bacteria can collect. Plaque that is not removed also hardens into calculus along and under your gums. The pockets and hard calculus make it difficult to remove plaque without help from a dentist, and periodontal disease can develop. If left untreated, periodontal disease can damage the tissues that support your teeth, even the bone.

Q *What is the difference between plaque and calculus?*

A Plaque is the sticky, colorless film that constantly forms on your teeth. Bacteria live in plaque and secrete acids that cause tooth decay and irritate gum tissue. This irritation causes an inflammatory reaction by your body that can eventually lead to gingivitis and periodontal disease. If plaque is not removed regularly by tooth brushing and flossing, it hardens to create calculus (also known as tartar). Calculus cannot be removed with a toothbrush; only a dental professional can remove it during an oral cleaning. To keep plaque and calculus under control, it is essential to brush your teeth twice every day, floss at least once every day, and see your dental professional for regular cleanings.

Q *What are common signs and symptoms of periodontal disease?*

A Periodontal disease is often silent, meaning symptoms - particularly pain - may not appear until an advanced stage of the disease. However, you should still be on the lookout for the signs and symptoms, which include:

- ✦ Red, swollen or tender gums or other pain in your mouth
- ✦ Bleeding while brushing, flossing, or when eating certain foods
- ✦ Gums that are receding or pulling away from the teeth, causing the teeth to look longer than before
- ✦ Loose or separating teeth
- ✦ Pus between your gums and teeth
- ✦ Sores in your mouth
- ✦ Persistent bad breath
- ✦ A change in the way your teeth fit together when you bite
- ✦ A change in the fit of partial dentures

If you notice any of these symptoms, be sure to contact your dentist or periodontist right away!

Q *Is periodontal disease contagious?*

A Research has shown that periodontal disease is caused by the inflammatory reaction to bacteria under the gums, so periodontal disease technically may not be contagious. However, the bacteria that cause the inflammatory reaction can be spread through saliva. This means that if one of your family members has periodontal disease, it's a good idea to avoid contact with their saliva by not sharing eating utensils or oral health equipment. If you notice that your spouse or a family member has the warning signs of a possible periodontal problem (bleeding, red and swollen gums, or bad breath) you may want to suggest that they see the periodontist for an exam. It may help to protect the oral health of everyone in the family.

Q *What can I do at home to prevent periodontal disease?*

A The best way to prevent periodontal disease is to take good care of your teeth and gums at home. This includes brushing your teeth after every meal and before bedtime, flossing at least once each day, and seeing your dentist or periodontist for regular exams twice a year. Spending a few minutes a day on preventative measures may save you the time and money of treating periodontal disease!

Q *I was recently diagnosed with periodontal disease. How often should I see my dentist for an examination?*

A Regular examinations are very important to keep track of the present status of your disease and any disease progression over time. Your dentist will work with you to create a maintenance schedule depending on how advanced your periodontal disease is at that time. Based on many variable factors such as your overall health, the severity of bone loss, and risk factors such as smoking and genetics, your periodontist will constantly tailor your care so your periodontal disease does not progress further. He or she may recommend exams every six months for mild periodontal disease, or every few months for more advanced stages.