

PERIODONTAL DISEASE

What is periodontal disease?

Everyone who allows dental plaque to build up around their teeth will develop *gingivitis*. This is a superficial infection of the gum tissue and leads to bleeding from the gums. It is caused by the bacteria (dental plaque) that live in your mouth.

If the bacteria are regularly removed your immune system can cope with the small amount that remains and the tissues around your teeth will remain healthy.

In areas that are more difficult to clean, such as in between your teeth, the bacteria build up to a level that your immune system cannot cope with and a more serious condition, *periodontitis*, may develop.

This is an infection of the gum tissue and bone that support your teeth. So controlling gum disease is a matter of keeping the bacteria at a low level, one that your immune system can cope with.

Who is prone to periodontal disease?

For most people, periodontal disease occurs gradually throughout adult life. A small proportion of people are more likely to develop periodontal disease earlier in life.

These people usually have a family history of periodontal disease and may also have a particular medical condition, such as diabetes. In addition, smokers are more likely to develop more severe periodontal disease, at an earlier age.

In people who are prone to periodontal disease, the infection spreads from the gum surface, down into the bone that supports the teeth, causing the bone to gradually dissolve away.

Depending on how prone you are to the disease and how well you clean your mouth determines how quickly the disease spreads through the bone.

What are the signs of periodontal disease?

Initially, in gingivitis, the gums are likely to bleed and can be swollen and red. However, in smokers, gum bleeding is often not very obvious despite periodontal disease being more common in smokers.

As gingivitis progresses into periodontitis, the gums may begin to recede down the root surface as the infected supporting bone dissolves away. The teeth may also drift slightly from their original position and gaps develop between them.

Often, spaces now as pockets will develop between the gum and the root surface. As the gums are still infected, bleeding is still very common.

As the amount of supporting bone decreases, a tooth will become loose and eventually will either fall out or need to be extracted by your dentist.

How can periodontal disease be controlled?

The root surfaces exposed by periodontitis are more difficult to keep clean, particularly when hidden within a pocket. Therefore, once established, periodontitis always progresses, unless you, your dentist and your hygienist work closely together to allow the gum tissues to heal and prevent the disease from recurring.

Your dentist and hygienist will thoroughly clean all the exposed tooth surfaces, in order to give your gum tissues a clean environment in which to heal.

This may require one or more appointments.

In addition, you will be taught and necessary techniques for keeping your mouth clean, on a daily basis. These techniques will include the use of the correct tooth brushing method and the use of either small brushes or dental floss to clean in between the teeth.

If you have any further questions, please ask your dentist or hygienist.