

Healthy gum tissue fits snugly around each tooth. It can be harmed by plaque, a sticky film of bacteria that forms on teeth. Bacteria in plaque create toxins that irritate gum tissues.

The early stage of periodontal disease is called gingivitis. Those with gingivitis may experience gums that are red, swollen and may bleed easily. The good news is that this early stage of periodontal disease is reversible. However, if it's not treated promptly, it may lead to a more serious condition called advanced periodontitis.

In this advanced stage, the bacterial irritation causes the gums to pull away from the teeth. Instead of a snug fit, the loose tissue now forms pockets that collect more plaque bacteria. The infection, which is sometimes painless, can destroy gum tissue and the bone that supports teeth. Unless periodontitis is treated, teeth may become loose, fall out, or they may need to be removed.



Healthy Gums



Gingivitis



Advanced Periodontitis

Recent research suggests there may be a link between gum disease and other health concerns such as cardiovascular problems, stroke, bacterial pneumonia and increased risk during pregnancy. Although more studies are needed, researchers are trying to determine if the bacteria associated with gum disease play a role in affecting these systemic problems. Tobacco use also increases the risk for gum disease.

Prevention Pointers

When plaque is not removed daily, it absorbs minerals found in saliva. The minerals form a rough, hardened material called calculus, or tartar. Once tartar sticks to the teeth, it can only be removed by a professional cleaning in the dental office. Tartar that is not removed becomes a "plaque trap," holding more bacteria and making it difficult to keep teeth clean.

Brushing your teeth twice daily and flossing or using an interdental cleaner once a day can help keep teeth clean. Look for products that display the ADA's Seal of Acceptance, your assurance that they have met the ADA's criteria for safety and effectiveness.

If you notice any of the following, see your dentist:

- Gums that bleed during toothbrushing
- Red, swollen or tender gums
- Gums that have pulled away from your teeth
- Persistent bad breath
- Pus between the teeth and gums
- Loose or separating teeth
- A change in the way your teeth fit together when you bite
- A change in the fit of partial dentures

Pain can occur in advanced stages or in rapidly progressing forms of the disease. But don't wait until it hurts. A combination of regular professional treatment and home care will help keep your smile healthy.

The WARNING Signs

It's possible to have periodontal disease and have few warning signs. That's one reason why it's important to have regular dental visits and professional teeth cleaning. Routine dental visits make it possible for your dentist to treat problems in the early stages.