

Treating Gum Disease

Gum disease, also referred to as periodontal disease, is a treatable condition, if proper dental help is sought out. This condition is an infection of the gums around the teeth and gradually affects the bone. While it may not initially feel painful, the disease can get worse and eventually lead to physical bone loss.

Scaling and root planing are the most common treatments for periodontal disease. Your dentist may also refer to this process as a “deep cleaning”.

The Cause

A sticky, film-like bacteria called plaque is the number one reason for gum disease. Plaque is always forming on your teeth and will stay there if not properly brushed and flossed. This may cause inflammation in your gums.

Inflammation leads to other problems like your gums pulling away from your teeth. As the gums do this, deep spaces are formed called “pockets”. As you can imagine, the larger the pockets, the more room for bacteria and plaque to grow. Before you know it, infection occurs. The only way to remove and clean these pockets properly is with a deep cleaning. Toothbrushes simply cannot get to the bottom of the pockets to safely remove all of the plaque.

Individuals who suffer from low immune systems may be more prone to developing periodontal disease. This includes diabetic patients, individuals with cancer, HIV, etc. Another key source of cause for periodontal disease is tobacco. Tobacco users are at a higher risk for gum disease, but also at a risk for the treatment being less successful. (We strongly encourage you to stay away from tobacco in any form.)

Periodontal Disease Stages

When your mouth is healthy, the gums appear firm and pink. Together with the bone, they firmly hold your teeth in place. Teeth appear free of calculus (aka tartar) or plaque.

The first or early stage of periodontal disease is known as gingivitis. This occurs as the gums become irritated by plaque. Slowly, the gums turn from a soft pink color to red, swollen tissue that may bleed when you brush or floss. With deep cleanings and consistent flossing, gingivitis may be reversed.

Now, if the plaque on your teeth continues to build up with no professional treatment, it will harden and turn into tartar. This is where it becomes periodontitis, a more serious condition. The gums become more inflamed and permanently damaged, as well as bone loss. The longer the condition goes untreated, the greater the threat of losing one's teeth.

Diagnostic Process

Periodontal disease is quite easy for dentists to detect in the early stages, if patients attend check-ups regularly.

- Most likely, your hygienist will use a periodontal probe to measure the pockets between your gums and your teeth. Healthy pockets measure less than three millimeters, while deep pockets are greater than four. This process is done gently; though, you can expect some discomfort if you have deeper pockets.
- Additionally, your dentist/hygienist will take x-rays to make sure that your teeth are properly supported with a strong bone.

If the dentist finds you at risk for periodontal disease, he may order a scale and root planing for you immediately or on your next visit. Then, he will apply antibiotics to the pockets. However, if your risk appears extensive, he may send you to a periodontist, who specializes in the treatment of periodontal disease.

Treatment

Because each mouth is different, each treatment plan for a patient with periodontal disease is different. Once the dentist has determined which stage of gum disease your mouth resides in, she will formulate a plan.

Sometimes, because a patient is simply at the beginning stages of gingivitis, she only needs one solid, professional cleaning. The doctor will also go over more effective ways to clean your teeth at home, so that you can avoid further advancement for the future.

Individuals with more advanced periodontal disease may require a deep cleaning. During this deep cleaning, the hygienist/dentist will use a periodontal probe to scale the teeth. This removes plaque and tartar below the gum-line in those deep pockets. Then, she will finish off with the root planing to smooth out the tooth root, in hopes of aiding the gum to reattach to the tooth.

This process is always followed by an antibiotic that is physically placed in the pockets. This piece of the puzzle is critical, because it will clear up any infection or possible bacteria that was left behind. Depending on the depth of the pocket or the severity of the situation, the doctor may also prescribe a special rinse or a tablet.

Be advised that sometimes this treatment process must happen more than once. A few weeks or months after your deep cleaning, you will return to your dental office. The doctor will again probe the pockets to see how deep they are and if another deep cleaning could prove beneficial.

Note that if you smoke or chew tobacco, it is likely this process will occur again and again. See your doctor for information on programs to help you stop smoking.

Post Treatment

In order to avoid scaling and root planing procedures for the future, regular and consistent brushing and flossing is of the utmost importance. Moreover, you may need to schedule check-ups closer together, like every three or four months depending on the severity of your condition. Also, you may require the assistance of a periodontist to be sure that your gums and bones are being properly maintained.

Another source of treatment for at home care includes rinsing with a strong mouthwash, as well as including fluoride toothpaste in your regular routine. Many individuals report improvement with brushing for two minutes twice a week with fluoride toothpaste.

Last, maintain a healthy diet. Those foods you ingest can greatly impact the condition and health of your mouth.

All is not lost with gum disease. Keep your chin up and seek out the proper help. It will get better, as you continue to treat it.