

What is Periodontal Disease?



From the American Academy of Periodontology



Periodontal disease (also known as gum disease or periodontitis) occurs when plaque bacteria at or below the gum line irritate the gums and trigger an inflammatory response characterized by reddened tissue, swelling, and bleeding.

Gingivitis—the mildest form of periodontal disease—causes redness, swelling, and bleeding of the gums. It usually can be reversed by daily brushing, flossing, and regular cleanings by a dental professional. If left untreated, gingivitis can advance into periodontitis, which is more severe.

In **periodontitis**, plaque bacteria have continued to accumulate below the gum line. When this happens, gums can separate from the teeth and create gaps (known as pockets) that may become infected. These pockets can deepen, often resulting in destroyed gum and bone tissue. Deep pockets may also cause teeth to loosen, and those teeth may have to be removed.

Periodontal disease is classified into four stages, ranging from the least severe Stage I (which could be mild or moderate) to the most severe Stage IV. Stages are determined by a number of factors, including pocket depth and bone loss. Additionally, these factors are used to determine the rate of periodontal disease progression as categorized by one of three grades: A (slow progression), B (moderate progression), and C (rapid progression). A patient's smoking habits and overall health (such as whether he or she has diabetes) can affect the severity and progression of periodontal disease.

Periodontal Disease Symptoms

Periodontal disease can be hard to detect in its early stages. Signs of gingivitis include bleeding, redness, and swollen or tender gums. Severe cases of periodontal disease may exhibit gums that appear to be pulling away from teeth, persistent bad breath, loose or separating teeth, pus between gums and teeth, or mouth sores.

Prevention

The first step to preventing periodontal disease is by brushing at least twice a day and using an interdental cleaner (such as floss) once a day to remove plaque and debris from between the teeth and below the gum line. The AAP also recommends that all adults receive a comprehensive periodontal evaluation annually.

Risk Factors

- **Poor Oral Health Habits:** Without twice-daily brushing and once-a-day flossing, there is an increased likelihood of plaque buildup.
- **Age:** Adults age 65 and over have higher incidences of periodontal disease, according to data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.
- **Medications:** Certain drugs can reduce the flow of saliva. Without adequate saliva production, the mouth can become a breeding ground for bacteria. Certain blood pressure medications can cause gum enlargement, which creates periodontal pockets and increases the risk of tissue breakdown.
- **Tobacco Use:** Users of cigarettes and chewing tobacco are at an increased risk of periodontal disease. Tobacco use is said to be one of the most significant risk factors in the development and progression of periodontal disease.
- **Genetic Predisposition:** Research has found some individuals may be genetically susceptible to periodontal disease.

Treatment

If periodontal disease is suspected, the best step is to seek the counsel of a periodontist, a dental specialist uniquely trained in the treatment of periodontal disease. Depending on the severity of disease, a periodontist may recommend a number of treatments including scaling and root planing (sometimes called deep cleaning), medications, and surgery to repair damage caused by disease. Periodontists are also skilled in procedures to restore aesthetics and function in the event of tooth loss, such as dental implant placement.