Stop It Before It Starts

Many people have some form of gum disease, but they don't realize it because the symptoms usually are painless at first. Gingivitis and gum disease are two terms that patients need to know, including their symptoms, how they affect oral health, and ways in which to prevent them.

What is gingivitis?

Gingivitis is inflammation of the gums. When your gums are healthy, they appear pink and firm, and they form a sharp point where they meet the tooth. The bacteria that cause cavities and gum disease are always present in the mouth. When too much food and bacteria build up in the spaces between the teeth and the gums, plaque forms. Over time, the plaque can harden into tartar and irritate the gums. Toxins in plaque may cause the gums to become infected, red (instead of a healthy pink color), to bleed easily, and to be occasionally tender. Gingivitis is a mild form of gum disease and is reversible with proper home care and professional dental care.

What is gum disease?

When gingivitis is not treated with brushing, flossing, and regular dental cleanings, it can evolve into a condition called periodontitis. If you have periodontitis, your gums pull away from your teeth and form pockets that are infected with a variety of different bacteria. Your immune system tries hard to fight the bacteria as the plaque spreads and grows below the gum line, but this is not always a good thing. Bacterial toxins and your body's natural response to fight the infection start to break down the bone and connective tissue that hold teeth in place. If left untreated, the bones, gums, and fibers that support the teeth can be destroyed. Your teeth will eventually become loose and may need to be removed.

How does gum disease develop?

There are many risk factors associated with gum disease. They include:

- **Smoking,** one of the most significant risk factors associated with gum disease.
- **Hormonal changes in girls/women,** which can make gums more sensitive and make it easier for gingivitis to develop.
- **Diabetes,** which puts people at a higher risk for developing infections, including gum disease.
- **Prescription and over-the-counter medications,** which sometimes can reduce the flow of saliva, which has a protective effect on the mouth.
- **Diseases,** such as cancer or AIDS, and their treatments can sometimes have negative effects on the health of a person's gums.
- **Genetics,** which can cause some people to be more prone to severe gum disease than others.

What can I do to prevent gum disease?

There are several things you can do to prevent both gingivitis and gum disease:

- Brush your teeth twice a day (with fluoride toothpaste).
- Floss your teeth every day.
- Visit the dentist routinely for a check-up and professional cleaning.
- Don't smoke—and if you do smoke, quit!
- Make sure your diabetes is well-controlled.
- Know the side effects of the medications you are taking.

What are the symptoms of gum disease?

Symptoms include bad breath that won't go away even after chewing gum or eating mints; red or swollen gums; tender or bleeding gums; painful chewing; loose teeth; sensitive teeth; or receding gums or teeth that appear longer than others.

What is the treatment for gingivitis and gum disease?

Dentists treat gingivitis by cleaning teeth to remove plaque and tartar. Scaling (cleaning) of the tooth and root surface may be necessary. Your dentist also may prescribe special mouthwashes or medicines. For gum disease, dentists usually have to use treatments like antibiotics, antimicrobials, deep scaling and root planing (cleaning and smoothing) of the root surface, or removing the infected gum tissue or teeth. Your dentist will talk to you about all of the treatment options available if you have gingivitis or gum disease. Your dentist also may refer you to a gum specialist (periodontist) if necessary. Always ask questions if you are concerned about your oral health.