From the office of:
Bhairavi P. Sheth, DMD

Gum...*Disease*?

Everyone knows to brush their teeth twice a day, but many people forget about their gums! The word *disease* sounds scary—and it can be if you don't take care of your gums. Here is some information about what gum disease is, what causes it, and how you can prevent it.

What is periodontal (gum) disease?

Periodontal means "around the tooth." Periodontal disease is a chronic bacterial infection that affects the gums and bone supporting the teeth. Periodontal disease can affect one tooth or many teeth. It begins when the bacteria in plaque (the sticky, colorless film that constantly forms on your teeth) causes the gums to become inflamed. Gingivitis is the mildest form of the disease. In this stage, the gums redden, swell, and bleed easily. There is usually little or no discomfort.

What causes gum disease?

As mentioned, plaque is recognized as the primary cause of gum disease. If plaque isn't removed each day by brushing and flossing, it hardens into a rough, porous substance called *calculus* (also known as *tartar).* Toxins produced and released by bacteria in plaque irritate the gums. These toxins cause the breakdown of the fibers that hold the gums tightly to the teeth, creating periodontal pockets that fill with even more toxins and bacteria. As the disease progresses, pockets become deeper, and the bacteria move down until the bone that holds the tooth in place is destroyed. Eventually, severe infection may develop with pain and swelling. The tooth may loosen and later require removal.

There are other factors, too. Smokers and tobacco users are at a higher risk of developing gum disease. Changing hormone levels in pubescent teenagers and women who are pregnant also can increase the risk of gum disease. Stress, clenching or grinding your teeth, an unhealthy diet, and diabetes can increase your chances of developing gum disease as well. And, in some cases, it's in your genes—nearly 30 percent of the human population is genetically predisposed to gum disease.

How is it treated?

In the early stages of gum disease, most treatment involves a special cleaning called scaling and root planing, which removes plaque and tartar around the tooth and smooths the root surfaces. Antibiotics or antimicrobials may be used to supplement the effects of scaling and root planing. In most cases of early gum disease, scaling and root planing and proper daily cleaning will definitely help. More advanced cases may require surgical treatment, which involves cutting the gums—sometimes with the assistance of a laser—to remove the hardened plaque build-up and then recontouring the damaged bone. The procedure also is designed to smooth root surfaces and reposition the gum tissue so it will be easier to keep clean. This procedure may be performed by your general dentist or by a specialist, like a periodontist.

Removing plaque through daily brushing and flossing and professional cleaning is the best way to minimize your risk.

How can I maintain treatment at home?

Sticking to a maintenance program is crucial for patients who want to sustain the results of periodontal therapy. You should visit the dentist every three to four months (or more frequently, depending on the patient) for spot scaling and root planing and an overall exam. Between visits, brush at least twice a day and floss daily.

How can I prevent gum disease?

Removing plaque through daily brushing and flossing and professional cleaning is the best way to minimize your risk. You also should try to reduce the activities mentioned above (smoking, eating an unhealthy diet, grinding your teeth, and so forth). Talk to your dentist and he or she can design a personalized program for home oral care to meet your needs.

Academy of General Dentistry

Resources

www.agd.org
At the AGD's Web site, you can search more than 300 oral health topics, post a dental question, sign up for e-newsletters, find an AGD dentist, and more.

1.877.2X.A.YEAR
AGD's toll-free referral number. Call to locate an AGD member dentist in your area.