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❙ **Fact Sheet** Periodontal Disease ❙

Periodontal Disease

It's important to brush your teeth for two minutes, twice a day, and floss between them at least once a day. Practicing these positive oral health habits can prevent the buildup of plaque between your teeth, which can cause periodontal disease, or gum disease. An estimated 80 percent of American adults have some form of gum disease. Read on to learn about what gum disease is and how you can prevent it.

What is periodontal (gum) disease?

Periodontal disease, better known as gum disease, is a chronic bacterial infection that affects the gums and bone supporting your teeth. It develops when plaque accumulates along your gum line, causing your gums to become inflamed. Healthy gums appear coral pink and firm and form a sharp point where they meet your tooth. The early stage of gum disease is called gingivitis. In this stage, the gums redden, swell, and bleed easily, although there is usually little to no discomfort with gingivitis.

What causes gum disease?

Plaque buildup is the primary cause of gum disease. If plaque isn't removed each day by brushing and flossing, it hardens. The hard plaque, known as tartar, contains bacteria that can irritate gums and break down the fibers that hold the gums tightly to the teeth, creating periodontal pockets that fill with bacteria. This can lead to severe infection, pain, and swelling. Your tooth or teeth also may loosen and require removal. Other factors linked to gum disease include smoking and tobacco use, pregnancy, stress clenching or grinding of teeth, an unhealthy diet, diabetes, and genetics.

Can gum disease affect my overall health?

Yes. People with gum disease may be more likely to develop heart disease or have difficulty controlling their blood sugar, and pregnant women with gum disease are more likely than those with healthy gums to deliver preterm, low birth-weight babies.

How will my dentist treat my gum disease?

In the early stages of gum disease, most treatments involve a special cleaning by your dentist, referred to as scaling and root planing. Scaling involves scraping off the tartar from above and below your gum line. Root planing gets rid of rough spots on your tooth root where germs gather, and helps remove bacteria from your mouth. Your dentist also may prescribe special mouthwashes or topical treatments. Lasers also can be used to provide fast and minimally-invasive gum disease treatment. More advanced cases may require surgical treatment to remove the infected gum tissue or teeth.

How is gum disease prevented?

Removing plaque through daily brushing and flossing and visiting your dentist twice a year for cleanings are the best ways to minimize your risk of gum disease. You also can lower your risk by maintaining a healthy diet and abstaining from cigarette and tobacco use.

It is important to catch gum disease early. Visit your dentist routinely to avoid plaque buildup, and if you have any concerns about your gum disease and its prevention.