

Taking Care of Your Gums

Good oral hygiene (brushing your teeth and flossing, for example) reduces the risk of cavities. Regular oral hygiene also helps reduce the risk of gum disease, which is caused by bacteria found in **dental plaque** (see: What Is Dental Plaque).

An article in the September 20, 2000, issue of *JAMA* discusses whether there is a possible relationship between gum disease and coronary heart disease. The researchers did not find a significant relationship between the 2 diseases.

WHAT IS DENTAL PLAQUE?:

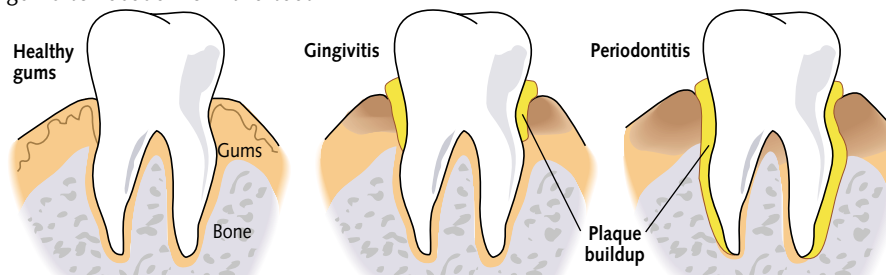
Dental plaque is a sticky deposit of bacteria, mucus, food particles, and other irritants found around the base of the teeth. The toxic effects produced by the bacteria in dental plaque cause both tooth decay and gum disease. (Dental plaque is composed of different material from the plaque found in arteries. The plaque found in arteries is composed mainly of fats and proteins.)

WHAT IS GINGIVITIS?:

Gingivitis is inflammation of the gums (or **gingiva**), the soft tissue that surrounds the base of your teeth. Gingivitis is usually caused by the buildup of plaque. The toxic effects of the bacteria cause gums to become irritated, red, and swollen and the gums may bleed easily. The plaque also forces the gums to recede from the teeth.

WHAT IS PERIODONTITIS?:

Gingivitis can develop into the more serious condition called **periodontitis**. Periodontitis is inflammation of membranes around the base of the teeth. Periodontitis can cause erosion of the bone holding the teeth in place resulting in tooth loss.



SIGNS OF GUM DISEASE:

- Your gums bleed easily, for example when you brush and floss or even when you eat
- Your gums are red, swollen, or tender
- You have bad breath that does not go away
- You have an unpleasant taste in your mouth that does not go away
- Your gums have pulled away from the teeth
- You find pus between your teeth and gums
- Your teeth are loose
- There is a change in the way your teeth fit together when you bite down or a change in the fit of your partial dentures

Gum disease is usually painless, so you may not know you have it until you experience one or more of the above signs. If you experience any of the above signs, see your dentist. Some medications may cause your gums to be swollen or to bleed, so tell your dentist about any medications you are taking.

PROTECTING YOUR TEETH AND GUMS:

- Brush teeth, gums, and tongue gently with a softbristled brush after meals and snacks. If unable to brush after all meals and snacks, brush at least twice per day.
- Clean between teeth with dental floss (to get where a toothbrush cannot reach) at least once per day.
- Eat a balanced diet limiting the intake of processed sugars, like candy and other snacks that contain a lot of sugar.
- Visit your dentist regularly (as often as he or she recommends, usually once per year or once every 6 months).

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

- American Dental Association
Gum Disease
211 E Chicago Ave
Chicago, IL 60611
312/440-2500
or www.ada.org/consumer/perio.html
- National Institute of Dental and Craniofacial Research
31 Center Dr, MSC 2290
Bethesda, MD 20892-2290
301 496-4261 or
www.nidcr.nih.gov/news/publica.htm

INFORM YOURSELF:

To find this and previous *JAMA* Patient Pages, check out the AMA's Web site at www.ama-assn.org/consumer.htm.

Additional Sources: American Dental Association, National Institutes of Health, National Institute of Dental and Craniofacial Research, *The AMA Complete Guide to Women's Health*, *The AMA Family Medical Guide*, *The AMA Encyclopedia of Medicine*

Brian Pace, MA, Writer

Richard M. Glass, MD, Editor

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