

# Poor Oral Health May Affect More Than Teeth and Gums

*The hazards of gum disease extend beyond your mouth and may jeopardize your heart and other areas of your body.*

Nearly 65 million Americans have periodontal (gum) disease, and men are more likely than women to have it, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

If you have periodontal disease, your teeth and gums may not be all that suffer. A study published online April 10 in the *European Journal of Preventive Cardiology* found that signs of periodontal disease were common in patients with heart disease and were associated with increased cardiovascular risk.

As such, it's imperative to maintain good oral hygiene, recognize and address any symptoms of gum disease, and be aware of other health conditions as they relate to your oral health, a Cleveland Clinic expert says.

"Periodontal disease can be linked to a lot of systemic diseases, while having major effects on the health of the supporting structures of your teeth," says Sasha Ross, DMD, a Cleveland Clinic periodontist. "It's a condition that definitely requires attention and treatment."

## BATTLE BELOW THE GUM LINE

Gum disease begins when food combines with bacteria in your mouth to form plaque, a colorless, sticky film. Left unchecked, plaque can harden, inflame your gum line and cause gingivitis, the mildest form of periodontal disease.

Untreated gingivitis can advance below the gum line and cause periodontitis. Your body sends inflammatory cells to the gums to fight the influx of bacteria, but in the process breaks down the tissue and bone that support your teeth. Your gums

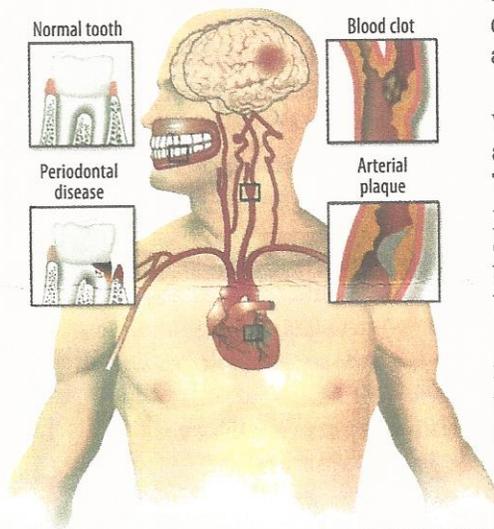


Illustration: Marty Bee

**In periodontal disease, bacteria and inflammatory products that damage the gums and supporting structures of the teeth can escape into the bloodstream and cause problems elsewhere. Research suggests that this toxic mix may contribute to cardiovascular disease, including the formation of arterial plaques and blood clots.**

## GUM DISEASE WARNING SIGNS

- Red, swollen, tender gums; pain in your mouth
- Bleeding while brushing, flossing, or eating hard food
- Gums that recede or pull away from the teeth
- Persistent bad breath
- Loose or separating teeth
- Pus between your gums and teeth
- A change in the way your teeth come together when you bite

can then pull away from your teeth, forming pockets that fill with bacteria and inflammatory cells that further destroy the supporting tissue and may lead to tooth loss.

Your risk of periodontal disease rises with age: About 50 percent of Americans age 30 and older have the disease, but the prevalence rises

to about 70 percent among those age 65 and older, CDC data indicate. Some patients have a genetic predisposition for gum disease and develop problems despite practicing good oral hygiene.

Other risk factors for gum disease are modifiable. Among the main ones is tobacco use, whether it's cigarette smoking or smokeless tobacco.

Diabetes patients, especially those with poorly managed diabetes, also are more prone to gum disease. Therefore, Dr. Ross says, diabetes patients may require more frequent dental/periodontal exams and must be vigilant about managing their blood sugar and oral health.

"It's a bidirectional relationship, meaning that treating the periodontal disease can help with the control of diabetes, and vice versa," Dr. Ross explains. "Controlling your diabetes can have a huge impact on your oral health."

Typically, periodontal disease causes no symptoms until it reaches an advanced stage (see chart for a list of periodontal disease symptoms). "When patients come to the office, they often say, 'I can't believe I have this disease, because it doesn't hurt,'" Dr. Ross says. "Only about 5 percent of patients who walk in have pain."

## BEYOND THE GUMS

What makes periodontal disease particularly dangerous is that the toxic mix of bacteria and inflammatory products that accumulates below the gum line can access the bloodstream and may contribute to problems elsewhere in the body.

A 2008 study found that men with a history of periodontal disease were more likely to develop lung, kidney, pancreatic and blood cancers. Other studies have tied periodontal disease, and the inflammation it creates, to erectile dysfunction, kidney disease, lung infections, rheumatoid arthritis, and cognitive decline.

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**PERIODONTAL...** *continued from 3*

Inflammation may underlie the association between periodontal disease and cardiovascular disease. In the *European Journal of Preventive Cardiology* study, researchers found that among 15,828 people, those with tooth loss and bleeding gums were more likely to have cardiovascular risk factors, including higher levels of blood sugar, blood pressure, LDL ("bad") cholesterol, and obesity. In another study, published Oct. 28, 2013, in the *Journal of the American Heart Association*, researchers reported that reductions in periodontal pocket size and gum-disease-causing bacteria were associated with slower progression of carotid artery narrowing, a marker of atherosclerosis.

Despite these findings, the American Heart Association (AHA) notes that treating periodontal disease has not been shown conclusively to prevent atherosclerotic cardiovascular disease, heart attacks or strokes.

Nevertheless, "I think we can say that poor gum health may increase your cardiovascular risk," Dr. Ross says. "I agree with the AHA that it's not yet proven to be causative, but there are a lot of studies that show a strong association with cardiovascular parameters."

**PROTECT YOUR TEETH AND GUMS**

By practicing good oral hygiene, you might ward off the potential adverse effects of periodontal disease beyond your gums (see What You Can Do).

See your dentist at least twice a year for checkups, and make sure he or she checks for periodontal pockets. The American Academy of Periodontology recommends a comprehensive periodontal evaluation once a year. If you have gum disease, you may need to see your dentist or periodontist more often.

"It's never a bad idea to see a periodontist to get things checked out," Dr. Ross says. "Controlling periodontal disease could impact your systemic health in a positive way." ■

**WHAT YOU CAN DO**

- Brush your teeth at least twice a day, brushing for two minutes at least one of those times and focusing on the gum line.
- Use dental floss to clean between your teeth at least once a day, ideally at bedtime. If you have problems with the dexterity of your hands, use floss picks or other aids.
- See your dentist for checkups or cleanings twice a year, and undergo a comprehensive periodontal evaluation at least once a year.
- If you smoke or use smokeless tobacco, talk to your physician about ways to quit. Tobacco use is a leading risk factor for periodontal disease.
- If you have periodontal disease, tell your doctor, and ask about any testing you might require in lieu of your gum disease.
- If you have diabetes, work with your doctor to optimize your blood sugar, which may have positive effects on gum disease.
- Ask your doctor or pharmacist if any medications you take can cause dry mouth or otherwise affect your oral health, especially if you have gum disease.