

Preventing Gum Disease for Overall Health Worth Smiling About

If you're not taking care of your oral health, you could be jeopardizing a lot more than your pearly whites. That's because researchers have linked gum disease with a host of health problems throughout the body.

According to the National Institute of Dental and Craniofacial Research, up to 80 percent of American adults have some form of periodontal (gum) disease. The disease is caused by the natural build up of bacteria, mucus, and other particles on the teeth as plaque. If plaque is not properly cleaned away, it can infect the tissues surrounding and supporting the teeth.



Gingivitis Can Lead to Health Problems

Many people have mild cases of gum disease, called gingivitis, which is characterized by swollen, red, and bleeding gums. If left untreated, gingivitis can grow into a more serious form of gum disease called periodontitis, which affects about 12 percent of Americans. Periodontitis is when gums pull away from the teeth, causing pockets that can become infected. Infection triggers the body's immune system, which fights the bacteria as it spreads below the gums.

Researchers believe that periodontal disease may cause health problems throughout the body by circulating bacteria from the mouth through the bloodstream, causing new infections. Inflammation, which can damage tissues, also may occur in other places in the body as a result of the activated immune system. These conditions increase the risk for heart disease and stroke.

People with diabetes can have problems because high glucose levels in saliva may help bacteria thrive. For pregnant women, periodontal disease increases the chance of delivering a premature baby.

Keep Gingivitis at Bay

Thankfully gingivitis can be prevented and even reversed with good oral hygiene. Do your health a favor and take care of your gums by following the steps below:

- Brush your teeth gently twice a day with a soft-bristled brush. Bristles should contact both the tooth surface and the gum line.
- Floss daily to clean between your teeth.
- If you smoke, quit.
- Avoid sugary snacks and beverages.
- See your dentist regularly for checkups and professional cleanings.

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