

### Gum disease

September 1998

Ninety-five per cent of adults in the UK suffer from some form of gum disease, but only 10% have serious problems.

By looking after your mouth, tooth decay and gum disease can be prevented.

#### What is gum disease?

Gum disease is a condition where the gums become inflamed and bleed when brushed. The term used for it by dentists is gingivitis. In its more advanced form it attacks the bone of the tooth socket and the fibres that attach the tooth to the bone. This is called chronic periodontitis.

#### How will I know if I have it?

Your gums will become red and swollen. When you brush your teeth, your gums will bleed. This happens when you don't brush away all the plaque or germs from where your teeth and gums meet. The germs left behind inflame the gums and make them bleed. Keep brushing the problem areas gently. The bleeding should soon stop. If there's no improvement ask your dentist for help.

Gum disease can also cause bad breath, make teeth sensitive and you often see deposits on the teeth which can make them look dirty.

#### What causes gum disease?

Gum disease is caused by plaque, a sticky film which is largely composed of bacteria. It grows on the teeth, especially if they are not cleaned properly and regularly. It acts as an irritant to the gums causing the characteristic inflammation. Left undisturbed, plaque may calcify (rather as a kettle furs up) and form a hard deposit on the teeth, known as tartar or calculus. This occurs most often where the salivary glands empty into the mouth, namely behind the lower front teeth and on the outside of the upper back ones.

#### What causes the more advanced form of gum disease, periodontitis.

The inflammation sometimes spreads underneath the gums, down the root of the tooth, attacking the fibres that hold the tooth in place and the bone of the tooth socket. When this happens, your dentist may be able to insert a probe in the gap that forms between the gum and the tooth, known as a periodontal pocket. If this becomes infected, an abscess may form, with resulting pain and more swelling. The pocket depth as measured by the probe is an indication of how advanced the disease has become. As the bone is destroyed so the tooth may become loose and eventually have so little support that it has to be extracted. Chronic periodontitis is a common cause of tooth loss in later life.

## British Dental Association Briefing

### What makes gum disease worse?

Commonly gum disease is experienced during pregnancy, but it can also get worse at other times when the hormones are unbalanced such as during puberty. People suffering from conditions such as diabetes are more prone to develop gum disease. Certain drugs, including sometimes the oral contraceptive, may make gum disease worse. People with general health problems or who are elderly are sometimes less able to look after their teeth and gums properly and those caring for them may be required to help with their oral hygiene.

### Who gets gum disease?

Without regular tooth brushing around all the gums, practically everyone – even children – will develop gingivitis. But progression to periodontitis is less predictable. Certain diseases (such as diabetes) increase the likelihood of serious gum disease. Periodontitis also becomes more severe with increasing age if it remains untreated. In addition, smoking is now known to be a strong risk factor, because it hides the signs of gum disease. By masking the early signs of gum disease, smoking may delay its recognition to the point where advanced periodontitis sets in and extensive gum treatment may be required.

### Is gum disease painful?

Gum disease is not necessarily painful and it can progress for many years without pain. Pain is most likely to occur when you have an acute burst of gum disease with the formation of ulcers on the gum, or if you develop a periodontal abscess.

### Ways to overcome gum disease

- You need to be seen regularly by your dentist who can monitor the health of your gums. Your dentist or hygienist can scale and polish your teeth to remove plaque and any hard deposits. Then it is up to you to keep your mouth plaque free by regular tooth brushing and, if necessary, flossing. Part of your treatment will include being shown the most efficient daily routine to keep your teeth and gums healthy. Some mouthwashes are helpful in controlling plaque. Periodontal disease is normally treated by scaling and the cleaning out of the pockets that have formed around teeth. Surgery may sometimes be required to remove them but if you can learn to keep your teeth and gums clean, this can often be avoided.
- From the age of 35 onwards more teeth are lost through gum disease than for any other reason. The good news is that gum disease is preventable and, in the early stages, can be completely cured. Even if there has been some irreversible damage to the bone around the tooth, regular care and attention by both you and your dentist can usually stop it getting any worse.
- If pregnancy hormonal changes make gum problems worse, take extra care to brush thoroughly. Remember, NHS dental treatment is free for expectant women and for one year

## British Dental Association Briefing

after giving birth.

- Smoking makes gum disease worse. If you are a smoker with gum problems think about cutting down or giving up, and anyway go for regular check-ups with the dentist.
- Many people have sensitive teeth. If your gums recede slightly to expose part of the root, your teeth may hurt when you consume hot or cold food or drinks. Toothpaste for sensitive teeth can help.
- Bad breath may improve with thorough daily tooth brushing. If not, visit the dentist for extra cleaning, advice on tooth brushing and to check for other problems.
- Loose teeth – you need a dentist's help. Keep your teeth and gums as clean as possible and seek advice.

### Extra help for cleaning

If you suffer from gum problems, the following can help:

- Some mouthrinses help keep mouths clean but others are less useful. The BDA accredits two products, Plax and Listerine. Your dentist or pharmacist can tell you what type of mouthrinse will help.
- Special toothpastes may help cure sensitivity or prevent gum problems. Always make sure they contain fluoride. The BDA accredits brands that meet certain standards.
- Floss, dental sticks and mini brushes are useful for areas of the mouth that are difficult to clean. Consult your dentist or hygienist to check if you need to use them and how best to do it.
- Disclosing tablets will show where you have left plaque, or germs, on your teeth after brushing. The dentist or hygienist will explain how to use them.
- Electric toothbrushes can be useful for people who have problems moving an ordinary tooth brush around their mouth.