

## Smoking and gum health

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Everyone knows smoking can damage lungs but most people are unaware of its effects on teeth and gums. Healthy teeth need healthy gums but gums can be seriously harmed if you smoke. If you smoke, try to give up. If you don't smoke, then for the sake of your teeth and gums as well as for everything else, don't start.

### What is gum disease?

Gum disease starts with inflammation where the gum meets the tooth - dentists call this gingivitis. The gums are red and slightly swollen and may bleed when you clean your teeth. This can progress so that the gum comes away from the tooth, with destruction of the bone which supports the tooth. This is called periodontitis. The tooth becomes loose and may eventually have so little support that it has to be extracted. Gum disease is a common cause of tooth loss in later life.

### Who gets gum disease?

Without regular toothbrushing 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 has a tendency to run in families. Age makes a difference, too - the disease becomes more severe with increasing age. But in addition, smoking is now known to be a strong risk factor.

### What does smoking do to gums?

Smoking is important because it hides the signs of gum disease. Gum disease is painless so you will not realise that

something is going wrong until your gums start to bleed. Bleeding is a way of alerting

you to a problem but nicotine reduces bleeding. By masking this early sign of gingivitis, smoking may delay its recognition to the point where periodontitis sets in and a return to a healthy state becomes impossible.

### Do smokers lose teeth sooner?

Yes. Surveys in many countries have shown that, age for age, smokers are more likely to have gums which are becoming detached from the teeth, more likely to be losing the bone supporting the teeth, and likely to have lost more teeth. This is why dentists all round the world are now actively discouraging their patients from smoking.

### What do dentists do about gum problems?

When you see your dentist, your gums and all the soft tissues of the mouth are examined, not just your teeth. Your dentist will be able to assess the health of your gums by careful examination and may take X-rays to show any bone loss around the roots of the teeth. In a healthy mouth the bone reaches close to the neck of the tooth and supports the tooth firmly in the jaw.

Treatment involves help with your own tooth-cleaning to remove plaque, the layer of bacteria on the teeth which is the basic cause of gum disease. Plaque is most damaging under detached gum margins. It may have to be removed by a dentist or hygienist. Surgery can help in severe cases, to remove gum pockets and make the

mouth easier to clean. Also, antibiotics are sometimes given.

Whatever the treatment, early detection will make it easier. Ask your dentist about the

health of your gums, even if you are not experiencing any symptoms. Be especially concerned about your gums if you smoke because gum disease may be more advanced than you think, and will be harder to treat.

### **But I can't stop!**

Yes, you can! Two thousand people give up smoking every day. And ten million people have stayed stopped in the last 15 years - that's over a thousand every day.

There are just three stages to stopping smoking: making up your mind that you want to stop, stopping, and then staying stopped. Take one day at a time and then do the same tomorrow. Nobody says it's easy but everyone says it's worth it. If you don't stay stopped, don't give up. Just go back to the beginning and start again.

For friendly, confidential and practical advice on how to stop smoking, phone **Quitline** on **0800 00 22 00**. All calls are free. **Quitline** is funded by the Health Education Authority.

