

1. What are periodontal diseases?

Periodontal diseases are those that affect the supporting tissues of the teeth and are more commonly known as gum disease. While some forms of gum disease are irreversible, one form, Gingivitis (inflammation of the gums) is reversible.

It is most commonly caused by a build-up of plaque (sticky layer of organic material containing bacteria) or calculus (hardened plaque) where the tooth meets the gums. The irreversible form of gum disease, Periodontitis, is caused by complex interaction between the bacteria and the immune response that leads to destruction of the bone and tissues around the tooth, and if left untreated can lead to tooth loss.

2. Who is a periodontist?

A periodontist is a dentist who specialises in the prevention, diagnosis and treatment of periodontal disease. Periodontists receive extensive training in these areas including additional years of education beyond dental school.

They are familiar with the latest techniques for diagnosing and treating periodontal disease. Dentists often refer their patients to a periodontist when their periodontal disease is advanced. However, you don't need a referral to see a periodontist. In fact, there are occasions when you may choose to go directly to a periodontist or to refer a family member or friend to your own periodontist.

3. Is it normal for my gums to bleed when I brush my teeth?

Bleeding gums are one of the signs of gum disease. Think of gum tissue as the skin on your hand. If your hands bled every time you washed them, you would know something was wrong. There are a number of other warning signs of gum disease.

4. What are some other warning signs of gum disease?

Other warning signs of gum disease could include swelling in the gums, receding gums, pus or frequent bad tastes in the mouth, teeth that appear to be drifting or whose position has moved recently and loose teeth.

5. What would happen if I did not receive any treatment?

Your bone and gum tissue should fit snugly around your teeth but when you have periodontal disease, this supporting tissue and bone is destroyed, forming 'pockets' around the teeth. Over time, these pockets become deeper, providing a larger space in which bacteria can live.

As bacteria develop around the teeth, they can accumulate and advance under the gum tissue. These deep pockets collect even more bacteria, resulting in further bone and tissue loss. Eventually, if too much bone is lost, the teeth will need to be extracted.

6. What can I do to avoid periodontal disease?

To maintain healthy teeth for a lifetime you must remove the plaque from your teeth and gums every day with proper brushing and flossing.

Regular dental visits are also important. Professional cleaning at least twice a year is necessary to remove calculus from places your toothbrush and floss may have missed.

7. Am I more likely to get periodontal disease as I get older?

Periodontal disease is usually chronic in nature and can begin during adolescence, which is why it is important to have regular examinations. With frequent visits to your dentist, the opportunity to identify and treat the disease as early as possible will help to prevent it from becoming more severe.

8. When should I see a periodontist?

Signs that you may need to see a periodontist include: gums that bleed easily, such as during brushing or flossing, red, swollen or tender gums, gums that have pulled away from the teeth, persistent bad breath, pus between the teeth and gums, loose or separating teeth, a change in the way your teeth fit together when you bite, sore or irritation in your mouth that does not get better within two weeks.

Your dentist or hygienist will be able to advise you.

9. What can I expect the first time I visit a periodontist?

During your first visit, your periodontist will review your complete medical and dental history with you. It's extremely important for your periodontist to know if you are taking any medication or being treated for any condition that can affect your periodontal care.

You will be given a complete oral and periodontal exam. Your periodontist will examine your gums, check to see if there is any gum line recession, assess how your teeth fit together when you bite and check your teeth to see if any are loose.

Your periodontist will also take a small measuring instrument and place it between your teeth and gums to determine the depth of those spaces, known as periodontal pockets. This helps your periodontist assess the health of your gums.

Radiographs (X-rays) may be used to show the bone levels between your teeth to check for possible bone loss. You will then be briefed about the findings and provided with a treatment plan.