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What is Gum Disease?

I am always amazed at the lack of information bestowed upon the public by the media about Gum Disease. Gum Disease is a general or broad term used to describe two major categories of gingival (gum) inflammation or infection. The two major categories are Gingivitis, and Periodontitis.

Please remember this second word, Periodontitis. Periodontitis is normally caused by, or occurs secondarily to Gingivitis.

Each of these two terms differs. Gingivitis is reversible, and Periodontitis is not reversible, but it can be halted with aggressive therapy. Gingivitis can be reversed with a good professional dental cleaning and some cooperation sink-side at home with the old crime-fighting duo known as brushing and flossing. Treatment for Periodontitis requires regular maintenance by a dentist or dental hygienist to prevent further destruction of the bone surrounding the teeth.

If your dentist tells you that you have Gingivitis, be worried, and prepare for some changes to your dental care habits at home. If your dentist includes the word Periodontitis in his diagnosis of your gum condition, you may have to come to grips with the fact that there may be a tooth or teeth lost sooner or later without aggressive therapy, meticulous homecare, and perhaps some elimination of addictive habits such as smoking and/or excessive alcohol consumption.

The gingiva or skin surrounding the teeth, can be subject to a wide range of mechanical (e.g. popcorn hull), viral (e.g. Herpes or cold sores), and bacterial (e.g. Gum disease), insults. Our gums or gingiva blanket the foundation for what keeps our teeth standing up straight and strong. The ultimate foundation underneath the blanket is the jawbone. The gingiva and jaw bone immediately surrounding the teeth can occasionally fall prey to the effects of Periodontitis.

In the case of Periodontitis, a bacterium, which cannot survive in the presence of oxygen, is the culprit. When these nasty little oxygen hating bacteria find a suitable home between the teeth and gums, devoid of any daily disruption such as flossing or brushing, they go to work. The production of toxins and gases begins, along with an invasion of the roots. The invasion of the root surface and production of toxins causes the immune system to treat the once healthy tooth as if it were foreign entity. The immune system knows no better than to destroy the foundation (bone), so that is exactly what it does to rid itself of

this harmful alien object which is your tooth or teeth. The bad news is the nonreversible side of this disease, once the bone adjacent to the teeth is gone, it does not regenerate by itself with a remorseful New Years Eve resolution to brush and floss better.

Once the immune system goes into action to eliminate this unknown object, it is usually a slow road to eventual tooth loss if not dealt with by your dentist or a specialist known as a periodontist. Too often I hear my patients say “my gums never hurt before my tooth became loose”. That’s because Periodontitis is a slow, sometimes very slow, low grade infection which may not show any signs of occurrence until it is either diagnosed with dental x-rays and a thorough evaluation, or it is too late.

If caught early, Periodontitis can be treated in an isolated area next to the teeth or tooth with simple treatment and remedied normally with excellent results. If allowed to progress, Periodontitis will proceed to gum abscesses, bleeding gums, loose teeth, and often bad breath.

The best armament you have against Gingivitis or Periodontitis is thorough homecare, and regular dental checkups/cleanings to determine if you have or are at risk of having either of these two conditions.