

Q: Do You Have Gum Disease? A: Probably. Q: So What?

A: If so, it will affect you breathe, your appearance, and eventually your comfort and ability to chew. It may affect also affect your general health in some surprising ways, possibly even shortening your life. More than half of all adults have gum disease, and for those over 35 years, it's about 75%. The bad news is most people don't even realize they have it.

First, let's define the term gum disease. That's a fairly generic term for a variety of conditions. Every form of gum disease is an infection of the gums, but some forms are much more worrisome than others.

All gum disease starts as Gingivitis. The technical name for gum tissue is gingiva. Gingivitis is infection and inflammation of the gums, but the bone around the teeth is not yet affected. All forms of gum disease are bacterial illnesses. The accumulation of millions of bacteria, and their toxins, on and under the edges of the gums causes inflammation in the tissue. Most gingivitis is painless although it does produce ugly, red, puffy gums that may bleed, and bad breath. It is usually completely reversible with a good professional cleaning and good hygiene at home.

One type of gingivitis is not painless and is not completely reversibly. Acute Necrotizing Ulcerative Gingivitis usually occurs in teenagers or young adults. It is quite painful and destroys the gingival papillae (the points of the gums between the teeth).

Given enough time, usually by the 30's, 40's, or 50's, gingivitis will often progress to Periodontitis. Periodontitis is when the gum infection has progressed into the bone surrounding the teeth. The bone infection and inflammation, while still usually not painful, destroys the bone. Only when there almost no bone left around the teeth will significant symptoms appear.

Signs of Periodontitis (also called Periodontal Disease or the older term Pyorrhea) are those already mentioned for Gingivitis plus gums that are pulled away from the teeth, white oozing (pus) from under the gums, loose or shifting teeth (gaps where there were not before), change in bite, and again, bad breath. Not to be gross, but a dentist or hygienist can smell often smell a patient with Periodontitis from several feet away.

Periodontitis is generally classified by the amount of bone that has been lost. In the mild (or early) stage, most of the bone is still present. In the moderate stage, about one half of the bone has been destroyed. In the severe (or advanced) stage, most of the bone is gone. Please note that even in the severe stage, up to a point, effective treatment can be done to stop the destruction and heal the infection. After that point, the only option is extraction and tooth replacement. The most common reason for people to have to go to denture is Periodontitis.

Unfortunately, the infection and inflammation from Periodontitis can and does spread to other parts of the body. In fact, when chewing, severe Periodontitis causes bacteria to flood directly into the blood stream.

Many medical conditions have been associated with Periodontitis. There is not a direct cause and effect relationship, but increased Periodontitis is associated with increased risk for premature babies of pregnant mothers, diabetes, heart disease, stroke, bacterial pneumonia, Alzheimer's, even some forms of cancer. I believe any physician treating any of these conditions would prefer that their patient not also have an infected mouth.

Early diagnosis in any disease is very helpful. Pain in Periodontitis, like most dental problems, usually doesn't appear until the condition is severe. Prevention is easier than treatment, and treatment is easier in early stages. With the advent of laser treatment, even moderate or severe cases are much easier to manage than they used to be. Make sure you see your dentist and ask him or her how your gums and bone are doing!

Dr Ward has practiced family dentistry in Big Spring since 1988. For more information on preventing or treating Periodontitis, or on many other dental subjects (in the form of previous Herald articles), see his website www.DavidWardDDS.com.