

Gingivitis (Gum Disease)

What is gingivitis?

Gingivitis is tender, swollen gums. It's the first stage of gum disease. If gingivitis is not treated, the bacteria causing the problem may attack the bones and other tissues that support your teeth. The bacteria can destroy the bone. Your teeth may get loose and need to be pulled.

What is the cause?

Gingivitis is most often caused by bacteria in plaque. Plaque is a sticky material that builds up on your teeth. It is made of mucus, saliva, food particles, acids, and bacteria. If it's not removed with daily brushing and flossing, plaque can lead to cavities, a hard buildup called tartar, and gum disease.

Other things that can lead to gingivitis are:

- Injury to your gums from not brushing and flossing your teeth correctly
- Untreated decay along your gum line
- Loose fillings or crowns
- Irritation from smoking or chewing tobacco
- Vitamin deficiency, especially a lack of vitamin C
- Diseases such as diabetes, thyroid problems, and problems with the immune system that make it harder for your body to fight infection or cause your body to attack your own tissue
- Medicines that make your mouth dry or that may cause your gums to get easily inflamed and swollen
- Pregnancy

Mental or physical stress can make gum disease worse.

What are the symptoms?

Symptoms may include:

- Tender, swollen gums that bleed easily
- Spongy, shiny gum tissue that looks red or purple
- Bad breath
- A bad taste in your mouth
- Sensitivity to cold, air, and acidic food, like orange juice or tomatoes
- Teeth that are loose or moving apart from one another
- Gums that have pulled away from your teeth
- A change in the way your teeth fit together when you bite

How is it diagnosed?

Your dentist will examine your teeth, gums, and jaw. Your dentist will check to see if you have any bone or gum loss.

How is it treated?

Treatment starts with professional cleaning of your teeth. The dentist or dental hygienist will remove tartar and plaque from the surfaces of your teeth. After the tartar and plaque are removed and the tooth and root surfaces are clean, the tissue can heal.

Other treatments may include:

- Antibacterial, alcohol-free mouth rinse
- Changes in the medicines you take if the problem has been caused or worsened by your medicines.
- Vitamin supplements
- Gum surgery

How can I take care of myself?

- Your dentist or hygienist will teach you the best ways to brush and floss your teeth. This may include the use of specially shaped wire brushes or rubber tips to clean between your teeth and increase blood flow in the gum tissue.
- Rinse your mouth with warm salt water (1 cup warm water mixed with ½ teaspoon of salt) to soothe your gums and lessen swelling.
- Take a nonprescription medicine for pain.
- Eat a healthy diet.

If you are pregnant or have diabetes, you should check the health of your gums regularly.

- Changes in hormones during pregnancy can make it easier for gum tissue to get tender and swollen.
- Diabetes makes it harder for your body, including gum tissue, to heal. It may also cause you to have less saliva. Saliva helps reduce acid and washes away debris.

How can I help prevent gum disease?

The best way to prevent gum disease is good dental hygiene.

- Follow your dentist's instructions for cleaning and flossing your teeth.
- If you smoke, try to quit. Talk to your healthcare provider about ways to quit smoking. Also, do not use chewing tobacco.
- Brush your tongue to help remove bacteria and food.
- Gently massage your gums with a soft toothbrush.
- Replace your toothbrush every 6 months and after you have a cold, flu, or sore throat.

- Never share your toothbrush. It holds bacteria that can be passed from one person to another no matter how well you clean the brush.
- Get regular dental exams and professional cleanings.

You can get more information from:

- American Dental Association
800-621-8099
<http://www.mouthhealthy.org/en/>

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