

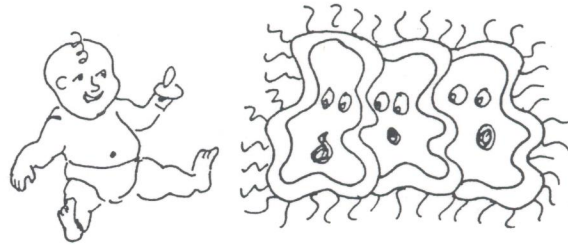
Dental Disease: Cause

Dental Caries (Tooth Decay or Cavities)

Tooth decay is the most common chronic disease in childhood. Yet, according to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services/National Institutes of Health in 2000, 25% of low-income children have never seen a dentist before starting kindergarten.

Many parents do not realize that:

- People are not born with the germs that cause cavities.
- Dental decay is an infectious disease that can be spread to the baby by the primary caregiver, usually the mother.
- The more cavity-causing bacteria in the primary caregiver's saliva, the greater the risk of spreading the bacteria to the child.
- Infection occurs anytime from approximately birth to four years of age.



Plaque is the sticky, colorless film that holds the disease-causing bacteria on teeth and gums. Plaque contains live bacteria, their food and their waste products. Streptococcus mutans is the chief bacteria that cause tooth decay. The "Strep mutans" is passed between persons usually through saliva and can occur when the caregiver:



- shares eating and/or drinking utensils with Baby,
- cleans pacifiers in his/her mouth,
- shares toothbrushes,
- pre-chews food for Baby,
- taste-tests the temperature of Baby's food, or when
- Baby puts fingers in the caregiver's mouth and then back into own mouth.

Caregivers should keep their mouths as healthy as possible, to reduce the risk of passing on dental disease.

Tooth decay usually first appears as chalky white spots on upper front teeth. Caregivers should lift up the child's upper lip to inspect the front and back of those teeth and call the dentist if suspicious white spots are seen.

Periodontal (Gum) Disease

Periodontal disease is a leading cause of tooth loss in adults. Plaque bacteria left above and below the gumline are the main source of the infection. In its early stages, periodontal disease is usually painless.

Periodontal disease is divided into two main categories: "gingivitis" (reversible inflammation of the gums) and "periodontal disease" (treatable but irreversible breakdown of the supporting structures of the teeth.)

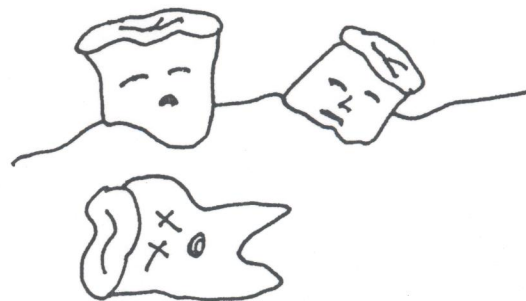


Gingivitis is the earliest stage of gum disease. Signs and symptoms can include red, swollen, tender, and/or bleeding gums. At this point, gingivitis is reversible

*Gum disease:
initially painless,
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with professional cleaning, improved home care and a good diet. Regular dental visits are essential to maintain healthy gums; the dental professional can assess gum health, treat problem areas early, remove plaque and tartar (calcified plaque) above and below the gumline and provide education.

Left untreated, gingivitis can progress to periodontal disease. Periodontal disease is advanced gum disease that involves the bone and ligaments surrounding the teeth. The gum disease has moved into these tooth-supporting tissues, and as bone destruction continues, pain often follows. As the disease progresses, more bone is lost. Pus may develop, and teeth might loosen or even fall out. The disease itself is treatable, but the body cannot grow the bone back naturally. A dental professional should check for periodontal disease at least annually. If disease is present, treatment will depend on the type and extent of damage.



Treatment methods can include scaling and root planing to remove bacterial deposits above and below the gumline, prescription medication and rinses, and periodontal surgery. Special techniques have been developed to stop the bone loss and are used by some dental specialists.



Gum disease can happen to anyone. Risk factors play a role, but for the most part, the infection can be avoided. Most adults show signs of gingival or periodontal diseases, and 14% of adults aged 45-54 and 23% of 65-74 year olds experience severe periodontal disease.

Dental disease is preventable with effective daily oral hygiene, dental visits every six months or as recommended, a diet of healthful foods, and the use of fluoride and sealants to strengthen teeth and prevent cavities.

***Possible Risk Factors
for Gum Disease:***

- *weakened immune system*
- *family history*
- *chronic health conditions, such as diabetes*

For additional information on tooth anatomy and function, see [A Healthy Mouth for a Lifetime: Oral Health for Everyone](#), pages 1.1 to 1.3.

