

# Oral Diseases

The two most common oral diseases, tooth decay and gum disease, are also the major cause for tooth loss and are caused by dental bacteria that cling to teeth and form a sticky, colourless film. This is called dental-plaque. Some of the bacteria in plaque live on sugars found in many foods. If you do not clean your teeth after eating, the bacteria in the plaque produces acids that dissolve minerals on tooth surfaces. After a while, a hole appears on the tooth surface, which is known as dental caries.

Unfortunately, the bacteria in the plaque not only cause tooth decay, but also causes gum disease. Within the plaque there are other bacteria that affect the gums instead of teeth, causing gum disease. Gum disease is an infection of the gum and bone that hold the teeth in place.

Plaque kept for a long time can harden. This is known as calculus. Calculus has a rough surface, which helps to build more plaque.

## Let's discuss tooth decay (Cavities) first...

Tooth decay is not just a children's disease; it can happen across all ages as long as natural teeth are in the mouth.

### What causes tooth decay?

As we discussed before, there is a type of bacteria in the dental plaque that causes tooth decay. This bacteria uses the sugar in our food to produce the acids that make holes in our teeth.

These holes may begin on different parts of the tooth. In general, these holes appear on the crown of teeth. However, older adults are at increased risk of having holes on the root surfaces of the teeth. These are holes in the area of a tooth close to or below the gum line.

You should make sure that these zones of the teeth are well brushed and cleaned to avoid the development of decay in these vulnerable areas.

### What are the *early* symptoms of tooth decay?

- Sensitivity to heat and cold, and
- Discomfort after eating sweet foods.

Tooth decay can occur on parts of the tooth that we cannot see; the only way to see these, is by taking a radiograph (X-rays). Therefore, if you experience any of the above symptoms, but cannot see the holes, this does not mean that you have no tooth decay and therefore you should have your teeth checked for tooth decay regularly.

**It is important to take care of holes in your teeth as they can quickly become advanced cavities. Cavities can cause severe pain, are costly to treat, and could result in extractions of teeth resulting in dentures - with all their associated disadvantages.**

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## Gum (Periodontal) Disease

At its early stages gum disease is still reversible and can usually be eliminated by daily brushing and flossing.

If left untreated, the disease gets worse and the infection spreads deeply into the gums and bone that support the teeth. This causes the gums to pull away (recede) from the teeth, or the gap between the tooth and the gums becomes deeper. This is due to a loss of the supporting bone. Then, gradually the tooth becomes looser and looser until it falls out or needs to be removed even though it may not be affected by tooth decay. This more advanced stage of gum disease is called **periodontitis**.

Unfortunately, this is not all, periodontal disease can affect your overall health. For example, gum disease may also cause bacteria to enter your bloodstream through damaged gum tissue. This can lead to general health problems including heart conditions.

### **What are the symptoms of gum disease?**

Carefully check your mouth for these early symptoms of gum disease.

If you notice any of the following 'silent' symptoms, you should seek advice from an oral health professional:

- Gums that bleed when you brush your teeth
- Red, swollen or tender gums
- Bad taste in mouth
- Gums that have pulled away from the teeth
- Bad breath that doesn't go away
- Pus between your teeth and gums
- Teeth that become loose or change positions
- Sensitive teeth
- Pain when chewing

### **Bad breath (halitosis)**

There are many causes for bad breath. However, two main ones are gum disease and dental caries. If you suffer from bad breath, you should have your teeth, gums and mouth checked.

In addition, having a dry mouth also contributes to the development of dental caries, gum disease and bad breath. This will be the topic of another section.

## **Prevention**

**The good news is that tooth decay and gum disease can be easily prevented by:**

- 1) limiting in-between meals sugary snacks to one per day;**
- 2) properly brushing your teeth with a fluoridated toothpaste after each meal; and**
- 3) flossing your teeth at least once a day.**