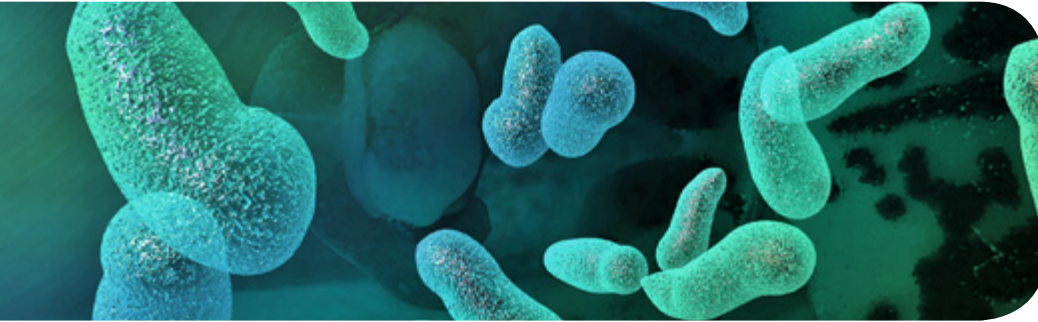


Contributors and Consequences of Periodontal Disease



No one wants to be diagnosed with periodontal disease. Although one of the risk factors is genetic, it is also possible to develop periodontal disease as a result of other factors that have nothing at all to do with genetics.

And whether your periodontal disease is in or out of your control, it is also clear that you can delay it or make it less severe if you do a good job of managing all the risk factors.

Possible Contributors to Periodontal Disease

The most effective way to prevent periodontal disease is to take good care of your teeth. If you don't brush your teeth, floss, and use mouthwash on a frequent and regular basis, and if you don't see a dentist twice a year, you are asking for trouble. Don't underestimate the power of good oral hygiene habits when it comes to protecting your oral health. This is especially true as you get older. Damage can be cumulative. If you've always taken meticulous care of your teeth, chances are you'll continue to do that as you age, and you'll also continue to protect your teeth.

Any form of substance abuse can cause problems in your mouth, but this is especially true of tobacco and alcohol:

- ▶ Your chance of developing periodontal disease is significantly higher if you smoke than if you don't. It increases the amount of plaque on your teeth, it causes deep pockets between the teeth and the gums, and it destroys the bone and tissue that support your teeth.

Daily smokers who are over the age of 65 have a 41.3 percent chance of being toothless, compared with a 20 percent change for non-smokers in the same age group.

- ▶ Alcohol is an irritant to the tongue, your gums, and the oral tissues; causes tooth decay; and damages your body's ability to fight infection. If you drink, especially heavily, chances are in the 80 percent range for you to also have moderate or severe periodontal disease.

You should also be careful when it comes to drugs, even if the doctor prescribed them for you and they are a reasonable treatment for some physical condition. If you take medication for heart disease, for depression, or as an oral contraceptive, for example, it is probably a good idea for your dentist to know that. Many medications cause dry mouth, which means your mouth is not producing correct quantities of saliva. Saliva is part of the digestive process, and it also helps control acidity within your mouth. Think what acid does: it eats away other substances. If you have dry mouth, the acids are more likely to eat away the enamel on your teeth.

Stress is another risk factor. You are more likely to have higher cortisol levels in your body if you are stressed, and those higher cortisol levels are destructive. They hurt your gums and your bones.

In addition to the cortisol, someone who is stressed is less likely to practice good oral hygiene on a regular basis, and is also more likely to turn to things like drinking and smoking as a way to relieve stress.

For women, hormones can make a difference when it comes to periodontal disease. During puberty, menstruation, pregnancy, and around menopause, a woman's body experiences large hormonal fluctuations that can definitely affect the health of your mouth and teeth.

Major illnesses affect the entire body. If you have diabetes, you have a higher risk for getting sick. That includes getting periodontal disease. Infections are a bigger problem for people with diabetes than they are for people who don't have diabetes, after all, and periodontal diseases is caused by a bacterial infection.

Conditions Associated with Periodontal Disease

Once you have periodontal disease, it is important to have it treated as soon as possible. Otherwise, you may experience some serious, negative consequences:

- ▶ It stresses your immune system and makes you more likely to develop other infections because your resistance isn't as good as it would be if you were healthier.
- ▶ You are more likely to develop respiratory disease.
- ▶ If you have diabetes, it will make your diabetes harder to control and more severe.
- ▶ If you are pregnant, your baby is more likely to be born too early and weigh too little.
- ▶ Your blood pressure will go up.
- ▶ You are 25 percent more likely to have a heart attack, and 10 percent more likely to have a stroke.
- ▶ It affects your ability to eat well and digest your food properly.
- ▶ You are at greater risk for obesity.
- ▶ You are more likely to develop pancreatic cancer.
- ▶ You probably won't live as long.

All these problems add up to one consistent message: take good care of your teeth, and if you do develop periodontal disease, don't ignore it. The consequences are too severe to do anything other than get the dental care you need.