

# Why Periodontal Disease Matters



If you are over 60 and live in the U.S., you have a one-in-three chance of having lost all your teeth. If you are over the age of 35, periodontal disease is the main reason for losing any teeth at all.

In other words, if you do lose all your teeth, it's not because you got a lot of cavities. It's probably because of periodontal disease.

That's enough reason by itself to be concerned, but it gets worse: periodontal disease is also something that can lead to serious health problems in other areas as well. Periodontal disease is linked to the following:

- ▶ A low birth rate for babies.
- ▶ Alzheimer's.
- ▶ Cardiovascular diseases, including an increased risk for
- ▶ stroke or heart attack.
- ▶ Diabetes.
- ▶ Lung disease.
- ▶ Osteoporosis.
- ▶ Pancreatic cancer.

If you are a pregnant woman with periodontal disease, it is especially important for you to see a dentist or periodontic specialist while you are pregnant. You don't want to affect the health of your baby by ignoring your periodontal disease during the pregnancy, thinking you will just deal with it later. Also, you put yourself at risk for long-

term damage to your mouth if you choose to ignore the problem for 40 weeks.

Perhaps the strongest link is between periodontal disease and heart problems. If you have periodontal disease, the byproducts from the bacterial infection can get into your bloodstream, causing your body to respond by making something called C-reactive protein (CRP). In turn, CRP is an important marker for cardiovascular disease; if you are getting tested regularly for your cholesterol levels, you should have your CRP levels checked at the same time, and for the same reason. Elevated CRP levels mean you are more likely to have a heart attack or stroke. By treating the periodontal disease, you also reduce the CRP levels, and also reduce your chance of having a heart attack or a stroke.

What is periodontal disease? It's a bacterial infection. The main symptom is chronic inflammation, but other symptoms are bad breath, bleeding, painful and swollen gums, receding gums, and loose teeth. If you have bone loss, as many women do because of

diseases such as osteoporosis, that means your teeth also lose part of their foundation in the jaw and are even more likely to fall out.

Having periodontal disease doesn't mean you don't take good care of your teeth. You might be very aggressive about checkups, thorough brushing, flossing, and using mouthwash, doing everything by the book, and still develop periodontal disease. That's because some people — up to 30 percent, in fact — have a genetic predisposition that makes them as much as six times more likely to develop periodontal disease. In addition, some populations are more at risk than others. Mexican Americans and African Americans are more likely to develop periodontal disease than people whose ancestors came from Europe. The New York University College of Dentistry did a study of recent U.S. immigrants and found that immigrants from Puerto Rico, India, or Haiti were also at greater risk.

It's important to remember, though, that whether you have a genetic predisposition or not, you still need to take the best care of your teeth that you can.

If you don't have any of the symptoms, does that mean you don't have periodontal disease? Since some people don't have any symptoms at all, especially in the early stages, you can't assume everything is fine just because it seems fine. It's important to talk to your dentist about anything you notice.

Having any form of gum disease is not a small thing; there is a lot of skin tissue in your mouth, and if you ignore a developing problem, the consequences are potentially very severe. Losing your teeth and being forced to deal with the physical consequences of that is not an inevitable part of old age. You can turn periodontal disease around. Treating it might involve taking antibiotics, but not necessarily; dentists, like other medical professionals, are increasingly cautious about using antibiotics because they want to be careful not to overuse them. However, there are other medications that can help, and most can resolve the problem quickly and without much fuss.