

Tobacco Use and Periodontal Disease: A Mouthful of Problems



From the American Academy of Periodontology



In addition to serious illnesses such as cancer, lung disease, and cardiovascular disease, tobacco use can present a mouthful of other complications. Research finds tobacco to be a significant risk factor in the development and progression of periodontal (gum) disease.

Increased Periodontal Disease Risk

Tobacco users are more likely to have calculus, which is dental plaque that has hardened on the teeth and can only be removed during professional dental cleanings. Calculus that is not removed from below the gum line can trigger an inflammatory response, eventually leading to periodontal disease. In cases of advanced periodontal disease, bacteria in the calculus can damage the gum and bone tissues that support the teeth. Pockets form when gums separate from the teeth, creating additional space for bacteria to collect and infect the tissue. Untreated disease and resulting pockets can lead to tooth loss.

Detection of Disease in Tobacco Users

The detection of periodontal disease is often more difficult in tobacco users. This is because the nicotine and other chemicals found in tobacco products can hide the symptoms commonly associated with periodontal disease, such as bleeding gums. As such, necessary treatment is often delayed, allowing the disease to advance in severity.

Treatment

Treatments for periodontal disease can vary widely depending on the progression of the disease in a patient. Smoking and tobacco use reduce the delivery of oxygen and nutrients to the gum tissues, weakening the body's defense mechanisms. This can slow down the healing process and make periodontal treatment results less predictable.

Because the treatment of periodontal disease can be more difficult in tobacco users, your periodontist will urge you to quit your tobacco use. Quitting seems to gradually erase the harmful effects of tobacco use on periodontal health and overall health.

Tips for Quitting Tobacco

- Ask for support from friends and family
- Start to exercise to relieve stress and curb cravings
- Avoid alcohol and other triggers
- Spend more time in places where smoking is prohibited
- Join a support group or enter counseling
- Find a substitute, such as sugarless gum