TAKECHARGE
WELCOA'S SELF-CARE BULLETIN

GETTING A GRIP ON
Gum Disease

Many adults nationwide have some form of gum disease. It can simply cause swollen gums or give you bad breath. It can also ruin your smile or even make you lose your teeth. The good news is that gum disease can be prevented with daily dental care.

The problem begins with bacteria. Our mouths are packed with these tiny microbes. They combine with mucus and other particles to form a sticky, colorless film—called plaque—on our teeth. Brushing and flossing can get rid of some plaque. But any that remains can harden and form tartar, a yellowish deposit that can become rock-hard.

Plaque and tartar buildup can lead to gum disease— technically known as periodontal disease. The most common and mild type of gum disease is called gingivitis. The gums become red and swollen, and they can bleed easily. Daily brushing and flossing and regular cleanings by dental professionals can usually clear up gingivitis.

If gingivitis is not treated, it can become a more severe type of gum disease called periodontitis. Symptoms of periodontitis include bad breath that won't go away; gums that are red, swollen, tender or bleeding; painful chewing; and loose or sensitive teeth.

In periodontitis, the gums pull away from the teeth and form "pockets" that become infected. Bacterial toxins and your body's natural response to infection start to break down the bone and soft tissues that hold teeth in place. If not treated, the tissues will be destroyed. Your teeth may eventually become loose and have to be removed. If you have periodontitis, your dentist may recommend a deep-cleaning method called scaling and root planing. In more severe cases, you may need surgery.

Most people don't show signs of gum disease until they're in their 30s or 40s. But getting older doesn't necessarily mean you'll get gum disease. Daily dental care and regular visits to your dentist can reduce your risk of gum disease.

Smoking greatly increases your risk for periodontitis—another reason not to smoke. Other factors that boost your risk include hormonal changes in women, certain medications and some illnesses like diabetes, cancer and AIDS.

Researchers are working to learn more about preventing and treating gum problems. Some are exploring whether stem cells might help to restore damaged tissues that support the teeth. Others are searching for genes and proteins produced by our bodies and by the bacteria in our mouths to see how they interact to affect gum health.

Some studies suggest that gum disease may increase the risk of heart attack or stroke or cause other health problems. But so far, it hasn't been confirmed that gum disease contributes to these conditions.

Although many aspects of gum disease are still being investigated, one thing is clear: controlling gum disease can save your teeth. That alone is an excellent reason to take good care of your teeth and gums every day.

TO PREVENT GUM DISEASE

» Brush your teeth twice a day with a fluoride toothpaste.

» Floss every day.

» Visit the dentist routinely for a check-up and professional cleaning.

» Don't smoke.