What is gum disease?
Gum disease, also known as periodontal disease, is the chronic inflammation and infection of the gum tissues which support the teeth and attaches them to the jaw bone. It can sometimes flare up into acute painful abscesses.

There are two main types, gingivitis and periodontitis.

Gingivitis is reversible and only affects the gum tissues, with no damage to the supporting bone.

Periodontitis affects both the gum tissue and the bone beneath. Its effects are irreversible.
How common is it?
Gum disease is more common than tooth decay and is a major cause of tooth loss in adults. 50 to 70% of the population suffer from mild to moderate gum disease with up to 15% suffering from severe disease where there is extensive bone loss.

![Patient with severe gum disease](image)

What causes it?
The prime cause of gum disease is plaque; a film of bacteria which constantly forms on the surface of your teeth. Ideally these bacteria have a healthy relationship with the body’s ability to fight bacterial infection. If plaque is not removed efficiently every day by brushing and flossing, it changes consistency. The type of bacteria also changes and they can release harmful substances that irritate the gum. If this irritation persists (e.g. by lack of brushing) the body fights against it and the tooth’s attachment to the gum breaks down causing pockets to form. These pockets can also harbour bacteria, which makes the problem worse.

Does everybody get it?
Not necessarily. To get gum disease you have to have susceptibility, which may be determined by your genetic make-up as well as by your general health. Factors such as smoking and stress affect your immune system and increase your risk of getting the disease.

Additionally local factors such as badly contoured fillings, crowns and dentures, which make it more difficult for you to remove plaque can also increase the chances of you getting the disease.

What are the signs?
Gum disease is not normally painful and may go unnoticed until it is quite advanced. This is when mobility, pain and recurring abscesses become prominent.

Healthy gums are pink and firm, and do not bleed.

The symptoms of gum disease are red, swollen and bleeding gums. There may also be a bad taste or breath and the gums may recede.

Ultimately when the disease is severe there may even be loose and drifting teeth. The last two signs are seen in the late stages of the disease and may eventually result in the loss of teeth.

Many people believe that it is normal to have bleeding gums, but this is a sign of the disease.
Can it be treated?
Yes, if it is in its early stages where only the gums are affected. Simple treatment involving cleaning, and instruction to help improve your brushing technique, should eliminate signs of the disease.

However, when the disease is in the advanced stages treatment is aimed at preventing it from getting any worse. This usually requires the help of a specialist. Some gum shrinkage may occur with successful treatment.

The success of any treatment for gum disease is dependent on your motivation and ability to keep the plaque in your mouth at a very low level.

What does the treatment involve?
Usually the first step is a course in improving your own tooth brushing technique to remove debris and plaque around your teeth and gums. This stage is very important as failure to remove plaque will hinder the success of any further treatment.

Following this you may require several visits for the removal of calculus/plaque (tartar) by a dentist or a dental hygienist. Sometimes antibiotics may also be needed to help improve your gum health.

On completion of this treatment, most problems will be resolved provided your own cleaning has improved. In some cases, where there are severe problems further treatment with surgery may become necessary. This involves raising the gum away from the teeth, cleaning the roots and then replacing the gum.

When the active treatment is completed you will need regular maintenance and cleaning to maintain your gum health. Your own dentist can normally provide this.
Can bone lost due to disease be replaced?
Not always. There are techniques available now that can help to restore some of the lost bone. However, this type of treatment is not suitable for everyone.

Can everyone be treated?
The success of treatment is dependent on your own motivation and dedication. If you have a susceptibility to gum disease and you cannot keep your plaque level down, then the disease cannot be treated.

Can the disease re-appear?
If you do not keep up your brushing techniques and regular maintenance checks with your dentist, it will recur. The most important thing is your motivation and dedication in controlling gum disease.

Prevention is better than cure - keep brushing and flossing effectively and get your gums checked regularly by a dentist to ensure you do not get gum disease!

Asking for your consent
We want to involve you in all the decisions about your care and treatment. If you decide to go ahead with treatment, by law we must ask for your consent and will ask you to sign a consent form. This confirms that you agree to have the procedure and understand what it involves. Staff will explain the risks, benefits and alternatives before they ask you to sign a consent form. If you are unsure about any aspect of your proposed treatment, please do not hesitate to speak with a senior member of staff again.

PALS - If you have any concerns
PALS is a patient-friendly, easy to access service designed to provide a personal contact point to assist patients, relatives and carers. If you have a problem that you have not been able to sort out we can help you to resolve it.

The PALS office is located in the main atrium of University College Hospital, 235 Euston Road, London, NW1 2BU.

PALS are open:
Monday to Friday: 10:00 till 16:00
Telephone: 020 3447 3042
Email: uclh.pals@nhs.net
If you need a large print, audio, braille, easy read, age-friendly or translated copy of the document, please contact us on:
Telephone: 020 3456 5076.
We will try our best to meet your needs.

**Contact**

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**How to find us**

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Huntley Street is close to Euston, Warren Street and Goodge Street underground stations and there are bus stops nearby. Apart from limited disabled parking there is no car parking at the hospital. You are advised to travel by public transport.