

# PERIODONTITIS

Gum disease is a painless but persistent problem

**B**eyond the beautifying aspects of today's most popular dental treatments, dentistry focuses on the far more basic aspect of maintaining oral health — repairing damage and avoiding pain.

Periodontal (gum) disease captures considerable attention on this side of the dentist's chair, as it is a major cause of adult tooth loss. It is stealthy and painless, however, so many Americans don't even know they have it in the early stages. Reportedly affecting 75 percent of Americans aged 35 and older (and 85 percent of Europeans), it has a higher incidence among women and an even higher incidence among smokers. Other factors that aggravate the condition range from diabetes and drug use to heredity and even hormonal changes.

Eventually making its presence known with symptoms such as bleeding and receding gums, periodontitis is defined as the chronic infection of the tissues that surround and support the teeth. It is caused by plaque, a sticky film of bacteria that builds up on the teeth and releases toxins that damage gums.


Like a turtleneck sweater, gum tissue should fit snugly around

teeth, and healthy gums and bone anchor them firmly in place. In its early stages, gum disease is called gingivitis and issues with swollen gums that bleed easily can still be reversed with daily brushing and flossing. However, the destructive cycle of plaque and tartar remaining on teeth too long eventually wears down the gingival or gum tissue. As plaque accumulates and gingivitis advances to periodontitis, it hardens into calculus, also called tartar, and the gums begin to recede and pull away from the teeth.

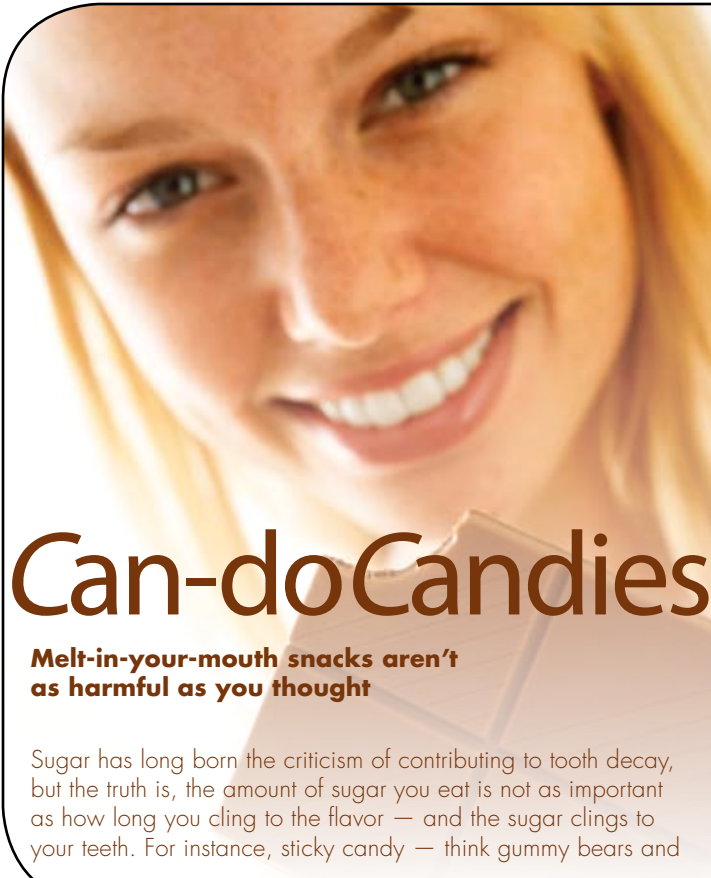
Fortunately, there are preventive measures that will slow progress or help reverse it. In addition to twice-a-day brushing, prevention includes removing food particles and the film of bacteria that lodges between teeth with dental floss. Floss can reach areas that brushing can't, and the American Dental Association recommends soft-bristled toothbrushes as well as toothpastes and antimicrobial mouth rinses with fluoride. Frequently promoted for fresh breath and fighting gingivitis, mouthwash also reduces bacterial counts and inhibits bacterial activity in plaque, thus providing additional protection against tooth decay.

Dental treatments in the advanced stages include root scaling, the removal of tartar and bacteria from tooth surfaces beneath your gums, and root planing, the smoothing of root surfaces to discourage further accumulations. Surgical procedures are more involved and range from flap surgery (pocket reduction surgery) to soft tissue grafts, in which tissue from the palate is relocated to the gum line to cover exposed roots and reduce further recession.

A newer treatment that takes a more preventive approach is called Perio-Protect. It involves the creation of a form-fitting appliance similar to a mouth guard that patients use to apply a prescription solution into the gumline (or gingival sulcus) twice a day. The antimicrobial agent, clinically proven to promote healing and aid in reducing bacteria buildup, has the added bonus of being a mild bleaching agent that may whiten teeth, but the primary motivation for this system is to reduce the need for costly surgeries.

The accumulation of plaque is cited as the most common cause of the destruction of healthy teeth, and regular dental appointments and cleanings are recommended to keep gingivitis and periodontitis at bay. 





# Can-doCandies

**Melt-in-your-mouth snacks aren't as harmful as you thought**

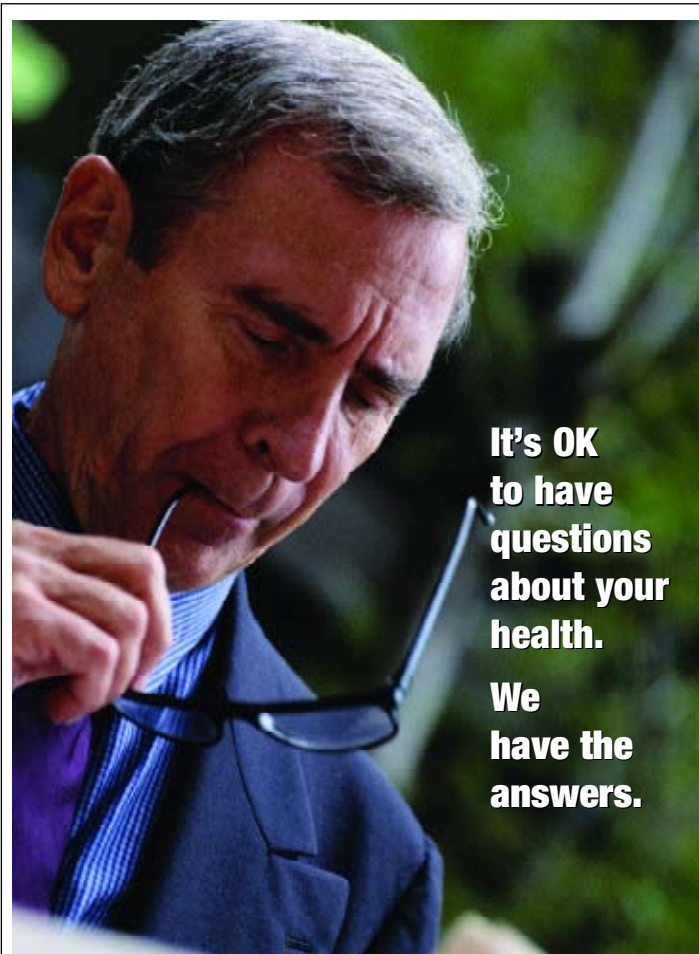
Sugar has long born the criticism of contributing to tooth decay, but the truth is, the amount of sugar you eat is not as important as how long you cling to the flavor — and the sugar clings to your teeth. For instance, sticky candy — think gummy bears and

jellybeans — are less likely to wash out from between teeth by saliva than now-you-taste-it, now-you-don't chocolate indulgences. Consumer advisors with the American Dental Association suggest approaching holiday sweets with a mind toward how long the sugary concoctions will stay attached to your teeth.

A sticky film of bacteria called plaque is constantly forming on teeth and gums, and when it comes in contact with sugar or starch in the mouth, the combination produces an acid that attacks the teeth for 20 minutes or more. With repeated "attacks," enamel starts to break down, leading to tooth decay.

To reduce the impact, the ADA recommends consuming sugary foods with meals because the increased saliva production of mealtime eating helps neutralize acid production. Also, drink more water — fluoridated of course — and try feeding between-meals cravings with sugarless gum. This fall, sugar-free chewing gums earned accolades from the American Dental Association's council on scientific affairs as a result of clinical studies that prove chewing them helps prevent cavities by reducing plaque acid and even strengthening teeth.

Popular gum manufacturer Wrigley submitted study results involving its three lines of sugarfree gums, Orbit, Extra and Eclipse, to receive the ADA seal of acceptance. Wrigley's studies show that chewing these gums after meals, typically three times a day and for 20 minutes, increases the production of saliva, which neutralizes and washes away plaque acid by bathing teeth in enamel-strengthening minerals such as calcium, phosphate and fluoride. — ELAINE ROGERS



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