



Gum Disease - "Gingivitis"

What is gingivitis?

It is an extremely common form of mild gum disease. Gingivitis literally means 'swollen gums' and is superficial. It is a reversible condition.

What causes gingivitis?

The culprit is 'dental plaque'. Plaque is made up of mouth bacteria ('germs') and is a white sticky layer that continually forms on the teeth. It irritates the gums and makes them red and swollen. When plaque hardens we call it 'tartar', and this can only be removed by the dentist or hygienist.

How can I tell if I have gingivitis?

Firstly take a good look at the gum margins in the mirror. Look for any red swollen areas especially between the teeth. Next, brush your teeth without toothpaste making sure you get the bristles under the gum margins. Blood on the bristles or when you spit out may be signs of gingivitis.

How come I have gingivitis? I brush my teeth twice a day!

Most people try hard to brush their teeth well. However, you may not realise that you are leaving small amounts of plaque on your teeth and gums when brushing. Usually, just a small change in the way you brush will improve things (see below). In fact, no matter how well you brush, toothbrushes do not clean in between the teeth and you may need additional methods to clean here (see below).

What can I do to improve the health of my gums?

Your dentist or hygienist will carry out a thorough 'scale and polish' removing all the hard tartar deposits and soft plaque deposits. This gives you a great start by giving you a clean mouth, but don't forget the plaque grows back each day, so now it's up to you to make sure the mouth is kept clean.

Toothbrushing:

Electric Brushes. Electric brushes appear to be the best, patients who use them remove more plaque and have healthier gums. Method: Start top left on the outside of the teeth near the cheeks. Carefully brush round to the other side using small gentle side-to-side strokes. Now do the same on the inside. Then do the bottom teeth on the outside and inside. Remember to always feel the bristles in the gum margin! Now do the biting surfaces. Common brands are 'Oral-B Braun' and 'Sonicare'. Replace the heads every 3 months.

Manual Toothbrushes. These too can be very effective but must be used correctly. Use the same 'side to side' technique as with the electric. Replace every 3 months.

Cleaning between the teeth. This removes the plaque that brushing can't reach. There are 3 methods, and most people need to use a combination of these:

- i. Inter-dental 'bottle' brushes that come in different widths. Gently push them back and forth between the teeth, but don't force them through as this will damage the teeth.
- ii. Flossing should be used for tighter spaces. Use dental 'tape'. Take about 1 foot of tape, and wrap it round the middle finger of each hand, leaving about 2 inches to work with. Use your thumb and index finger to pass the floss between the teeth. Form a 'c' shape round the tooth, and move the tape up and down to wipe off the plaque. Repeat this between each tooth using a fresh piece of tape by winding it on round your fingers.
- iii. Woodsticks can also be used to gently clean out plaque from between the teeth. Other methods are better, but woodsticks are better than nothing!

N. PRASAD, B.D.S. (HONS), M.F.D.S. R.C.S. (ENG), B. McCARTNEY, B.D.S.,
L. FROST, B.D.S., F.D.S. R.C.P.S. (GLAS) SPECIALIST IN ORAL SURGERY