Gum disease

This information sheet from Great Ormond Street Hospital explains the causes, symptoms and treatment of gum disease and where to get help.

Gum disease is an inflammation of the gums. The gums become swollen and red and can sometimes bleed. It is often caused by poor dental hygiene or sometimes by injury to the gums. It can be prevented by regular tooth brushing and dental check-ups.

Gingivitis, one type of gum disease, is an inflammation of the gums due to a build of plaque or tartar around the gumline. If treated, gingivitis can be reversed.

Gingivitis is often caused by poor dental hygiene. However, it can also be brought on by:

- injury to gums
- poor diet
- stress
- a weakened immune system

Long-standing gingivitis can turn into a more serious form of gum disease called periodontitis. As well as inflamed gums, peridonitis causes problems with the tissue and bone that holds the tooth in the tooth socket. In severe cases, this can cause the tooth to fall out.


What are the signs and symptoms of gum disease?

Common symptoms of gum disease might include:

- bleeding gums
- bright red or purple appearance to gums
- gums that are tender when touched
- mouth sores
- swollen gums
- shiny appearance to gums

How is gum disease normally diagnosed?

A dentist can assess a child's symptoms. Severe cases may need an x-ray to check the condition has not progressed into periodontitis.
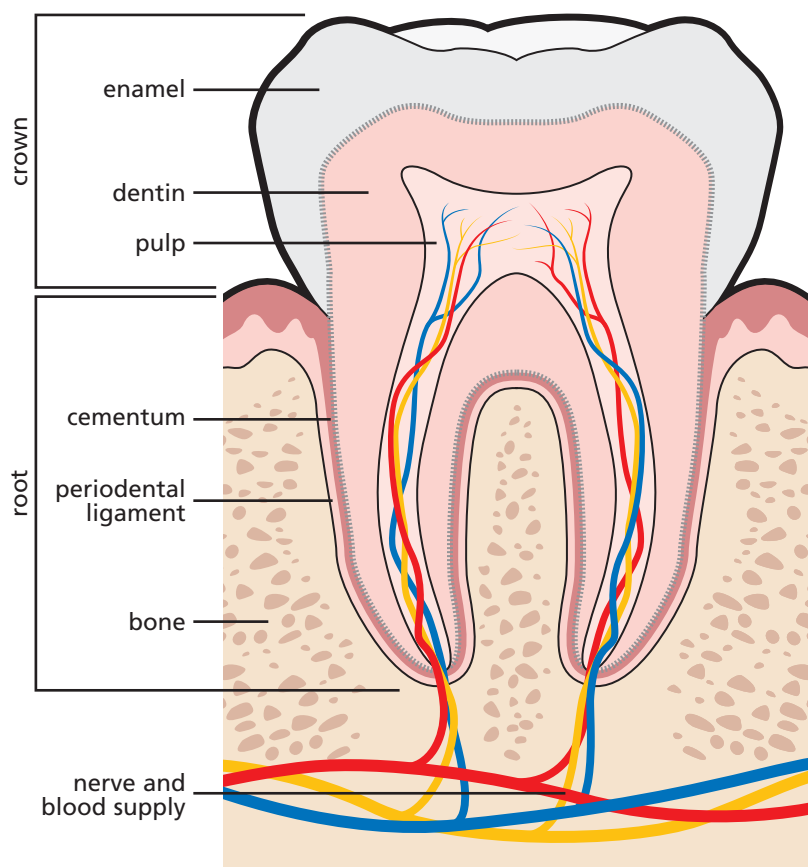
How is gum disease normally treated?

Treatment will include a dental health professional cleaning the teeth to remove the harmful bacteria that are causing the gum disease. If necessary an anti-bacterial mouthwash may be prescribed.

The most effective way to treat and/or guard against gum disease is to practice good oral hygiene. A good routine should include:

- brushing twice daily – once first thing in the morning and once last thing at night
- regular dental check-ups
- use a medium textured toothbrush, which is less likely to damage teeth or gums.
- replace toothbrushes often
- keep all removable dental appliances clean

What happens next?

Take a child to the dentist if their gums are irritated, swollen or bleeding.

Mild cases of gum disease can be treated successfully. Without treatment it can develop into periodontitis and cause more serious problems.

Further help and advice

Talk to the child's doctor or health visitor.

Contact the British Dental Health Foundation – an independent charity working to improve standards of oral care.

British Dental Health Foundation
Tel (Dental Helpline): 0845 063 1188
Website: www.dentalhealth.org