

# Gum disease and heart health.



The link between oral health and general health has been widely researched. Poor oral health and certain health conditions such as diabetes, high blood pressure, and heart disease are known to have a two-way link. This means that poor oral health can increase your risk of certain health conditions. Similarly, having certain health conditions can increase your risk of having poor oral health. Here, I'll explain the relationship between gum disease and heart disease.

## What is gum disease?

**Gum disease describes a range of conditions that affect the tissues surrounding and supporting the teeth. This includes the gingiva (gum), bones and the ligaments attached to the teeth. It presents in many forms and can be broken down as follows.**

### Gingivitis

Gingivitis is a mild form of gum disease. It causes swelling (inflammation) and redness in your gums. You may also notice some bleeding whilst brushing your teeth or flossing. It's usually painless, although some people may experience mild discomfort.

It commonly occurs when there is a build-up of plaque or bacteria on the teeth. This is usually due to poor oral hygiene such as inadequate tooth brushing and flossing. However, good oral hygiene measures can help to prevent gingivitis.

Other factors may increase your risk of gingivitis. These include smoking, diabetes, certain medications, genetic susceptibility, pregnancy, hormonal fluctuations, stress, and certain diseases.

### Periodontitis

If left untreated, gingivitis can lead to a more serious form of gum disease called periodontitis (periodontal disease).

In periodontitis, bacteria spreads below the gum line, which can lead to inflammation and damage to the tissues and bone around the teeth. Unlike gingivitis, this damage is usually irreversible. In severe cases, it can result in the loosening and/or loss of teeth.

#### Common symptoms include:

- persistent bad breath
- an unpleasant taste in your mouth
- loose or shifting teeth
- loss of teeth
- gums that bleed easily
- red, swollen, or inflamed gums
- discomfort or pain
- pockets of pus (abscesses) between your teeth and gums

It's important to highlight that **not all patients with periodontal disease present in the same way**. Most people will respond well to improved oral hygiene and professional treatment.

## The link between oral and heart health

There's a link between poor oral health and several health conditions, including heart disease. One study found that having gum disease increases your risk of heart disease by around 20 percent.<sup>^</sup>

It's thought that people with long standing (chronic) gum disease have more inflammation in their bodies. They also have an increased presence of bacteria in the bloodstream, which can spread to the heart. This can lead to, or worsen, the fatty deposits within the arteries (known as atherosclerosis), which is the main underlying cause of heart disease.

Despite the link between poor oral health and general health, it's important to reiterate that many people who have poor oral health won't experience heart problems and vice versa.



**Having gum disease increases your risk of heart disease by around 20%.<sup>^</sup>**

<sup>^</sup>Source: [theheartfoundation.org](https://theheartfoundation.org), 2017

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