

## **What is periodontal disease?**

Periodontal disease (gum disease) is an inflammatory condition. Inflammation is part of the body's natural defence mechanisms. It occurs in response to a build-up of bacterial plaque on the teeth and gums.

For some people this natural inflammatory process is too severe or too poorly controlled and damage occurs to the gum and bone that support the teeth. The disease can be controlled, but bone loss is usually irreversible. Approximately 10% of the population is severely affected by periodontal disease, and by the age of 60 about 80% of the population will have some mild to moderate bone loss. If you have been diagnosed with periodontal disease, other family members may be at increased risk as there appears to be a genetic factor involved.

Ideally, they should be screened and monitored for potential problems by their dentist or hygienist. Poor daily oral hygiene is the biggest risk factor, followed by smoking. Smokers lose approximately three times as many teeth as non-smokers. Poorly controlled diabetes, stress and lifestyle can all contribute to gum disease.

## **Can periodontal disease be treated?**

Periodontal disease can be treated successfully by stabilising the disease. Further damage can be prevented, but there is no cure. Bone loss is usually irreversible and gum shrinking will occur. Without treatment the condition will continue to deteriorate.

Your role in the management of periodontal disease is crucial. Mouths need to be cleaned to a very high standard to reduce the bacteria that trigger the inflammation. This can be achieved with a combination of treatment with hygienist or dentist and excellent daily home care. It is impossible to know exactly how long it will take to stabilise, but the more effective the daily home care regime the more quickly the gum condition will improve. Advice and help with cleaning techniques will be given by your dentist and hygienist. In a few cases antibiotics may be required, but antibiotics are not routinely used in the treatment of periodontal disease.

Without excellent daily home care, treatment cannot be successful. Controlling risk factors is also important. Help is available to people who want to stop smoking- don't be afraid to ask.

## **What if periodontal disease is not treated?**

Without treatment the gum disease will progress and teeth may become loose, infected and need to be extracted; or they may even fall out. There is some evidence that a poor periodontal condition may affect cardiovascular health and has an influence on the stability of diabetes.