

Q: I knew I had a little bleeding from my gums when I floss and I noticed some occasional bad breath but I was shocked by the diagnosis of “periodontal disease”. Can you tell me more about it?

A: I’m not surprised by the near silence of your symptoms, as periodontal (gum) disease generally doesn’t hurt. Thus, it often goes untreated. Teeth are like fence posts in the ground (bone). When gum infection occurs the gums unzip, the bone slowly melts away and the forces on the teeth cause tipping, drifting and loose teeth—potentially ending in tooth loss. There are numerous causative factors such as poor oral hygiene, heredity, stress, other systemic challenges/illness, and lack of professional intervention/treatment.

Tooth loss is a significant long-term threat but in the past decade we’ve uncovered more significant worries with the links between periodontal disease and overall health. Dr. Michael F. Roizen, author of the New York Times best seller RealAge: Are You as Young as You Can Be? states that “gum disease is the leading cause of inflammation in the body, which causes aging of the arteries and can lead to impotence, premature wrinkling, heart attack, stroke, diabetes decreased immune function, and other organ damage.” He goes on to say that “flossing daily and regular professional dental cleanings are the equivalent of being 6.4 years younger”—the largest factor in his book. Periodontal (gum) disease also predisposes you to pneumonia, bronchitis, emphysema and Alzheimer’s disease. Women with osteoporosis may be at higher risk for periodontal disease and vice versa. Periodontal disease during pregnancy has been associated with toxemia, pre-term delivery and lower infant birth weights.

In short, periodontal disease is a serious matter. It is important that your hygienist and dentist complete a thorough assessment of your gum health or disease at every cleaning appointment.