

Bleeding gums is not normal - say NO to bleeding gums

by Andreas Stavropoulos*

You may have noticed that your gums bleed from time to time without any reason – any reason you know about, at least. For example, when you brush your teeth or when you bite on a sandwich or an apple. Sometimes you may find traces of blood on your pillow in the morning. You may think this is not a big deal and that it may be normal. But it is not. Gums are not supposed to bleed spontaneously without a good reason, just as other parts of your body should not bleed for no reason.

Bleeding gums are definitely not OK – they are a sign that you are developing or suffering from gum disease. They are a warning sign and you should act immediately and visit your dentist for a periodontal assessment.

What is a gum disease and why does it concern you? There are two main types of gum disease: gingivitis, the mild and reversible form; and periodontitis, the more serious and irreversible form. Both forms are caused by dental plaque, consisting of hundreds of microbes that stick to the surfaces of the teeth and attack your body. If these microbes are not removed mechanically in an efficient and regular way – by brushing or flossing, for example – they cause gingivitis and often also periodontitis, an inflammation of the tissues surrounding the teeth.

Gum disease can have two kinds of consequences, in the mouth and in the rest of the body. At the local level, in the mouth, gum disease may trigger bad breath and cause teeth to move and eventually fall out. As a result, it can create problems with chewing and speaking, as well as causing serious aesthetic problems. At a distant level, in the rest of the body, gum disease seems to contribute to the development or aggravation of serious diseases such as diabetes, cardiovascular disease, chronic kidney disease, erectile dysfunction, rheumatoid arthritis, Alzheimer's, and even some types of cancer. This distant effect is possible for two reasons: the bacteria under the gums can pass into the bloodstream and cause systemic inflammation, and they can also migrate to other parts of the body distant from the mouth.

The sneaky part is that gum disease often causes no pain. If your tooth decays and develops a cavity, at some point it will hurt and this will make you visit your dentist. But as gum disease does not really hurt, it can go by undiagnosed for many years. In fact, if you are older than 35 years there is every likelihood that you have some degree of gum disease. If you are male, if you smoke, if you have suffer diabetes or pre-diabetes, then you are at an even greater risk of developing gum disease.

Luckily, gum disease cannot camouflage itself. It has clear warning signs. So, reddish and swollen gums – and bleeding gums in particular – should ring your alarm bells. Gums bleed simply because they are ill.

According to the 'Dossier on periodontal disease' published by the EFP and available at www.efp.org, gum disease is likely to be the most common chronic condition suffered by the European population and it certainly has a major public-health, economic, and social

impact. However, the good news is that gum disease is easily preventable and treatable in most cases.

The European Federation of Periodontology (EFP), the leading scientific organisation in the world dealing with gum health and gum disease, devotes its global awareness initiative “Gum Health Day 2020” on May 12 to the importance of recognising bleeding gums as a sign of disease and a reason to seek prompt qualified help. There is more information at gumhealthday.efp.org.

Because gum disease affects not only oral health but may also have a very negative impact on your overall health and your quality of life, the EFP urges you not to ignore bleeding gums. Visit your dentist or oral-healthcare specialist as soon as possible and have your gums checked. As our slogan for “Gum Health Day 2020” puts it: “Say NO to bleeding gums!”

* Andreas Stavropoulos is professor of periodontology at Malmö University in Sweden, a member of the executive committee of the European Federation of Periodontology, and co-ordinator of Gum Health Day 2020, a major global awareness initiative with support from more than 45 scientific national societies of periodontology In Europe, Latin America, northern Africa, Caucasia, the Middle East, and Asia.