Treating periodontal disease

Scaling and root planing

Periodontal diseases (also known as gum diseases) are infections of the gum and bone that hold teeth in place. They often are painless, and you may not be aware that you have a problem until your gums and the supporting bone are seriously damaged. The good news is that periodontal diseases often can be treated in the early stages with scaling and root planing.

During a checkup, the dentist examines your gums for periodontal problems. An instrument called a periodontal probe is used to gently measure the depth of the spaces between your teeth and gums.

At the edge of the gumline, healthy gum tissue forms a very shallow, V-shaped groove (called the sulcus) between the tooth and gums. The normal sulcus depth should be 3 millimeters or less. With periodontal diseases, the sulcus develops into a deeper pocket that collects more plaque bacteria and is difficult to keep clean.

If gum disease is diagnosed, your dentist may provide treatment, or you may be referred to a periodontist, a dentist who specializes in the diagnosis, prevention and treatment of periodontal diseases. Treatment often depends on how far the condition has progressed and how well your body responds to therapy.

PREVENTION AND TREATMENT

Prevention includes a good daily oral hygiene routine. Brushing twice a day with fluoride toothpaste and cleaning between teeth once a day with floss or another interdental cleaner help prevent plaque from forming. Regular dental checkups and cleanings are important.

Scaling and root planing is a method of treating periodontal disease when pockets are greater than 3 mm. Scaling is used to remove plaque and tartar beneath the gumline. A local anesthetic may be given to reduce any discomfort. Using an instrument called a small scaler or an ultrasonic cleaner, the dentist carefully removes plaque and tartar down to the bottom of each periodontal pocket. The tooth's root surfaces then are smoothed or planed. This allows the gum tissue to heal. It also makes it more difficult for plaque to accumulate along the root surfaces.

Your dentist may recommend, prescribe and administer medications to help control infection and pain or to facilitate healing. At a follow-up appointment, the dentist checks how the gums have healed and how the periodontal pockets have decreased. When pockets greater than 3 mm persist after treatment, additional measures may be needed.

You'll be given instructions on how to care for your healing teeth and gums. Maintaining good oral hygiene and continued, sometimes lifelong, follow-up by your dentist are essential to help prevent periodontal disease from becoming more serious or recurring. ■

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