

Gum Recession: Causes and Treatments

When your gums recede or pull away from your teeth, it is called gum recession. Gum recession can happen to people of all ages. Sometimes it happens even if a person takes good care of his or her teeth.

Gum recession can cause problems for your dental health. If you have gum recession, your dentist can help you understand the causes and recommend a treatment.

When teeth are healthy, gum tissue fits around each tooth like a cuff. In a tooth with gum recession, the gum tissue has pulled away from the tooth. This can leave the tooth root exposed. Since the root surface does not have a hard enamel covering like the crown (top) of the tooth, the root may become sensitive to hot and cold. Also, the exposed tooth root is more at risk for decay.

Causes

Gum recession can be caused by

- periodontal (gum) disease
- brushing your teeth too hard or using a hard-bristled toothbrush
- trauma to gum tissues, such as a sports injury
- partial dentures that don't fit right
- genetics—some people are born with gums that are thin or weak
- prominent tooth roots or attachment muscles that can push gums out of place
- smoking and using any kind of tobacco



Gum recession of a crooked tooth

Treatments

The treatment for gum recession depends on the cause. If the gums become unattached from the tooth, it is important to treat gum recession. Otherwise, it may get worse.

If gum recession is caused by brushing too hard, your dental office staff can show you a better way to clean your teeth. This will not repair the existing damage, but it will prevent new damage to the gums.

If gum recession is caused by periodontal disease the first step is usually a treatment called scaling and root planing. The dentist removes plaque and tartar from the tooth and root surfaces. This treatment helps gum tissues heal and reattach to the tooth. For many patients, this treatment plus excellent oral care at home and regular dental visits can help control periodontal disease and gum attachment loss.

If gum recession is caused by partial dentures that don't fit right, your dentist can adjust or remake them for you.

If recession is advanced, a gum graft may be needed. A graft is when a thin piece of gum tissue is taken from another place in the patient's mouth and attached where the gum tissue has receded. Once the graft heals, it covers the exposed tooth root. Grafts may be done around one or more teeth. They protect the tooth root from sensitivity and decay. A graft can also be used to make a smile look better.



Before gum graft



After gum graft

Care after treatment

If you have a gum graft, your dentist will tell you how to care for your gums. This may include using a special mouthrinse or changing what you eat. A bandage or dressing may be placed over the graft to help it heal.

Since gum grafts are a kind of surgery, the area may be tender or sore, and it may swell. Most patients can resume their normal routines the next day. However, you may need to avoid chewing where the surgery was done for some time, up to a week or two.

The success of the gum graft depends on several things. To help your gums heal after surgery:

- Avoid smoking or using any kind of tobacco.
- Do not drink alcohol.
- Follow any other instructions from the dental team.

There are other things that can slow down healing. These include clenching or grinding your teeth, diet or nutrition problems, and some medicines or health issues. Be sure to tell your dentist if any of these things apply to you.

After your gums have healed from surgery, keep your teeth and gums healthy by brushing gently twice a day with a fluoride toothpaste. Also, be sure to clean between teeth daily with floss or another between-the-teeth cleaner.

Gum recession photos courtesy of Dr. Bernard W. Murray.

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