

YOUR HEALTH

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Being long in the tooth may signal a problem with gums

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The one thing all of us worry about when we go to the dentist is: Will I have any cavities?

But there is another problem that is just as significant but is likely never on our radar screens: gum recession.

That is when your gums move away from your teeth. It makes your teeth look long and exposes the root - possibly causing pain when eating or drinking anything hot, cold or sweet. Undiagnosed or untreated, receding gums can lead to decay and even tooth loss.

Why don't many of us pay attention to this condition? Dentists say it's because much of the time people don't feel any pain from it. And if the teeth aren't in the very front of the mouth, you also might not notice the gums are shrinking.

But in fact, one study concluded that 100 percent of people older than age 50 have recession on at least one tooth, says Dr. Kenton A. Ross, a general dentist in Fayetteville, Ark., and a spokesman for the Academy of General Dentistry.

The cause of gum recession is up for some debate.

There's no disagreement that recession can result from periodontal disease, an infection of the gums and bone that can come with age or poor oral hygiene. But for those whose mouths are in otherwise stellar shape, it's not so simple.

The American Dental Association and many dentists say that recession can happen if someone brushes too aggressively with a medium- or hard-bristled toothbrush, injuring the gum tissue.

But others say there is a more deeply embedded problem. A malformed bite or the clenching or grinding of teeth can cause the teeth to be constantly jarred - which then causes injury to the gums.

"To be fair and balanced, there are dentists that disagree with this," says Dr. John A. Cianciola, a periodontist in a family practice in Gates and Webster. "Based on everything I've ever seen in my career, I believe the way teeth come together is an important factor."

Many people clench their jaw or grind their teeth, either during the day or when they're asleep, causing the teeth to move slightly against the gums, Cianciola says. Or, a misplaced tooth or teeth in the mouth can cause the person to bite strangely, forcing teeth into an awkward position.

Mark Connors, a Pittsford general dentist, says he looks for signs of wear on the teeth in people with gum recession.

"You can also follow it on people who have the worst oral hygiene," Connors says of claims that recession has to do with brushing. "They all show similar signs of wearing."

Hard brushing is definitely a culprit, Ross says, but tooth displacement and grinding can add to the problem.

"If you combine some factors such as tooth position and toothbrush abrasion, you can get a cumulative effect," Ross says.

Therefore, treatment of recession depends on the diagnosis. If tooth brushing is suspected, patients will get a friendly lecture about the proper way to brush.

If it's suspected the patient is biting strangely or grinding, several orthodontic remedies can be tried. A person can wear a bite guard at night. Or, a retainer or braces might be needed to pull a stray tooth into place. But since braces are the last thing adults want to wear, there is also the product Invisalign, a clear plastic mouthpiece that fits over the teeth.

The worst part of all of this is that once gums recede, they will not grow back.

Sometimes patients get a gum graft over the exposed tooth root to protect against decay and to strengthen the base of the tooth. The procedure can cost between \$600 and \$2,000 per tooth, depending on the extent of the damage, Cianciola says.

Kim Popen, 45, of Brockport, has a daughter who works at Cianciola's office. Popen went to Cianciola because her left upper cuspid had major recession. She has since been diagnosed as having a problem with her bite and will wear Invisalign to reposition her teeth. But she also decided to have a gum graft put over the tooth.

The doctor took a small piece of tissue from the roof of her mouth and transplanted it over the tooth's root.

"I have a toothy smile," Popen says. "It was vanity that made me go and get it done."

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Preventing gum recession

- * Visit your dentist twice a year. The dentist will measure and keep eye on rate of recession.
- * Use a soft-bristled toothbrush.
- * Brush in soft circles.
- * Be aware of any jaw pain, particularly after waking. It could be a sign of clenching or grinding teeth.

Sensitivity training

The American Dental Association says sensitive toothpaste can help many people with pain from gum recession. You should consult your dentist about the pain before regularly using one. Buy only toothpaste that has the ADA's seal of approval.

Sensodyne was once the only sensitive toothpaste available, but Colgate, Aquafresh and Crest now also make them. It could take a few weeks for the toothpaste to work.

If pain persists, see your dentist again.

PHOTO CAPTION

Receding gums may not cause pain, but they are a problem. Katie Popen assists as Dr. Lou Cianciola, right, grafts a piece of tissue over the tooth's root.

JAMIE GERMANO staff photographer