

Targeting Tobacco Use

You are probably aware of the devastating effects that smoking and tobacco use can have on your heart, lungs, and other organs. However, you might not be familiar with the whole other “mouthful” of problems caused by tobacco use. For example, tobacco use is a significant risk factor in the development and progression of periodontal disease, which is a major cause of tooth loss in adults. The sooner you take aim at your tobacco use and quit, the closer you will be to healthy teeth and gums!

Tobacco users are more likely to have calculus, dental plaque that hardens on your teeth and can only be removed during professional cleanings. If this calculus is not removed and it remains below the gum line, the bacteria in the calculus will infect the gums causing redness and swelling, otherwise known as inflammation. This inflammation damages the tissues that support the teeth, including the bone. When this happens, the gums can separate from the teeth, forming pockets. Tobacco users often have deeper pockets than people who do not use tobacco. These pockets can then fill with more bacteria, which leads to more inflammation. If the infected pockets are left untreated, the gums may shrink away from the teeth, making teeth appear longer and possibly causing them to become loose and fall out.

The detection of periodontal disease is often more difficult in tobacco users. This is because the nicotine and other chemicals found in tobacco products can hide the symptoms commonly associated with periodontal disease, such as bleeding

gums. Since the detection of periodontal disease in tobacco users can be difficult, necessary treatment is sometimes delayed.

Treating periodontal disease in tobacco users can be a difficult task, but not an impossible one. Smoking and tobacco use reduces the delivery of oxygen and nutrients to the gingival tissues, weakening the body’s defense mechanisms. This can slow down the healing process and make periodontal treatment results less predictable. For example, dental implants that are placed in a tobacco user’s mouth fail more often than they would in a patient who does not use tobacco. Additionally, the actual treatment of periodontal disease can vary widely depending on how far the disease has progressed. If caught in the early stages, simple non-surgical periodontal therapy may be used.

Because the treatment of periodontal diseases can be more difficult in tobacco users, your periodontist will urge you to quit your tobacco use. Quitting seems to gradually erase the harmful effects of tobacco use on periodontal health. One study showed that 11 years after quitting, a former smoker’s likelihood of developing periodontal diseases was not much different from one who had never smoked. And with the increasing amount of research indicating that periodontal health may be related to overall health, reducing your risk of periodontal disease is more important than ever. Start taking aim at quitting your tobacco use today and move one step closer to a lifetime of periodontal health and happy smiles!



Tips to help you quit

- Try to pick a stress-free time to quit
- Ask for support from friends and family
- Start to exercise to relieve stress and improve health
- Get plenty of rest
- Eat a well-balanced diet
- Join a support group
- Brush your teeth often
- Spend more time in places where smoking is prohibited
- Find a substitute, such as sugarless gum

The American Academy of Periodontology Patient Page is a public service of the AAP and should not be used as a substitute for the care and advice of your personal periodontist. There may be variations in treatment that your periodontist will recommend based on individual facts and circumstances. Visit perio.org to assess your risk and for more information on periodontal disease.