

PERIODONTITIS

From the teeth into the whole body

It's a tough furry coating adhering firmly to the teeth and gums. The neutral medical name for it is "biofilm": enormous numbers of bacteria, around 500 species altogether, romping around in the oral cavity. Most are harmless but some of them cause disease. They bring the immune system onto the scene - with the result that the gums become inflamed and the underlying bone is eroded. Periodontitis.

The body's defense system, always on guard, does not tolerate some of the bacteria in the oral cavity. Enzymes are produced to render the microbes harmless. However this can also cause collateral damage and destroy healthy tissues. A sure sign: the gums bleed and pockets form. Ultimately the teeth loosen and fall out.

Picture gallery gums (7 images)

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Oral bacteria and heart attack

Even with proper oral hygiene, the gums are an ideal hideout for bacteria. The margin of the structure supporting the teeth contains recesses. A few of the bacteria that the toothbrush forgot here then penetrate into the oral mucous membrane, which mobilizes the immune defenses. In the end these use inflammation to attack the bacteria, and fatally often the body's own gums and underlying bones as well. Professional medical cleaning of the teeth is the treatment of choice. In most cases this eliminates the cause of the inflammation. If the latter is stubborn, the bacteria may also be tackled specifically with antibiotics, but this doesn't always render the gums permanently free from inflammation. A few patients have a predisposition to inflammation of their masticatory apparatus. Minimal genetic peculiarities can make their immune system over-react at this point.

Periodontitis hides yet another danger: it can be the gateway through which bacteria invade the body, where the intruders then trigger further inflammation - mostly unnoticed - for example in the veins and arteries. That can then lead to a heart attack.