Gum Recession

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Gingival recession or receding gums refers to the progressive loss of gum tissue around teeth which, if left untreated, can result in tooth root exposure. Gum recession can be difficult to self diagnose in its early stages because the changes often occur gradually without symptoms. Regular dental examinations can assess the risk factors of recession and help to prevent it.

Gum recession is a widespread problem that dentists diagnose and see on a daily basis. It is important to thoroughly examine the affected areas to make an accurate diagnosis of the actual underlying problem or condition causing the recession. Once the cause of gum recession has been determined, surgical or non-surgical procedures can be performed to halt the progress of the recession and prevent it from occurring in the future.

THE MOST COMMON CAUSES OF GINGIVAL RECESSION ARE:

1. **Position of tooth or teeth in dental arch.** Because gum tissue is supported by the bone surrounding teeth, the position of the tooth in the dental arch determines the position of the gum tissue. If a tooth and the root are in a prominent position, the gum tissue is thin overlaying the tooth or root and unable to withstand the forces applied during chewing or proper tooth brushing. Teeth can be positioned in close position to muscles which allow lips to pucker. If the attachment of the muscle in close to the margin of where gums tissue meets a tooth recession may occur because of the constant muscle movement of the lips. Teeth can be positioned either by nature or orthodontic treatment.

2. **Trauma.** Brushing with too much pressure or too frequently can result in a chronic excessive force on the gum tissue and cause it to "wear away." Use of a hard bristled toothbrush can cause excessive force also. A person must brush with a soft bristle toothbrush only. Hold the toothbrush with a soft hand and brush the teeth in small, circular motion which follows the scalloped anatomy of the gum tissue. Ill-fitting prosthetics to replace missing teeth, such as partial dentures, can cause gum recession by exerting pressure on the gum tissue causing tissue death or necrosis and subsequent recession. Wear can also be caused by bruxing, grinding, or clenching habits that can cause bone loss.

3. **Chewing tobacco.** Any kind of tobacco use has devastating effects on the entire oral cavity. Chewing tobacco, in particular, aggravates the gingival lining of the mouth and causes gum recession from chemical trauma. It can also cause cancer.

4. **Periodontal disease.** Periodontal disease is the loss of supporting bone surrounding teeth as a direct result of a chronic bacterial infection of the gum tissue. Since the gum tissue is supported by the jaw bones which house the teeth, if the bone is disappearing or becoming thinner than the gum tissue will recede with the bone. Periodontal disease can have symptoms that include gum inflammation, bleeding while brushing or bad breath and ultimately the loss of teeth.

Gum recession can lead to sensitive teeth. Sensitivity resulting from root exposure usually can be lessened or eliminated with the use of toothpaste specific for sensitive teeth. If the gum recession is sufficient the root surface is visible during normal smiling or speaking, this can lead to a “toothy” smile with dark spaces visible between very long appearing teeth.

Every case of gum recession is slightly different and therefore many treatments are available. The nature of the problem which caused the recession needs to be addressed before any treatment can be recommended.

If overly aggressive brushing techniques are eroding the gums, a softer toothbrush and/or a gentler brushing technique should be used. If poor oral hygiene is a problem, a prophylaxis (dental cleaning) may be recommended to rid the gum pockets of debris and bacterial. If the case of severe tartar buildup or bone loss surrounding the teeth, scaling and root planning will be performed to heal the gingival inflammation and clean the teeth and root surfaces. If tooth position is the cause of the gingival recession, orthodontic treatment or minor tooth movement can reposition the root eliminating further gum recession. Clenching and bruxing can sometimes be treated with a night guard.

Once the cause of the gingival recession has been addressed, surgery or cosmetic procedures can be recommended to improve the esthetics of the teeth and gums.

Your mouth is important to your overall health. It is also the most useful part of your body; it is used to eat, it is used to speak and it is used to breathe. You have a lifelong need for ideal dental health. We are passionate about your health and take pride in providing only the best care. Come meet my staff and me and let us check out your smile.

Dr. Marc Baker has a baccalaureate degree from the University of Michigan and a Doctor of Dental Medicine degree (DMD) from Temple University School of Dentistry. He has worked with the Montgomery County Center for Technical Studies and the PA Dept. of Labor and Industry, and has lectured in the area.