

# The Gum Disease–Cancer Link

**M**uch has been reported over the years about the strong link between oral health and overall health and the important clues to other health issues that teeth and gums hold. Periodontal (gum) disease has been shown to be a precursor or indicator of cardiovascular disease, stroke, diabetes, and low-birth-weight and/or premature births. It's important to understand this link, because one out of every two Americans aged 30 and over has some form of periodontal disease, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Now a new study is claiming that people with severe gum disease (periodontitis) may have an increased risk of developing certain types of cancer.



The research, which was published in the *Journal of the National Cancer Institute* in January 2018, is the largest study looking at the association between gum disease and overall cancer risk. Researchers from the Tufts University School of Medicine, the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, and the Tufts University School of Dental Medicine evaluated 7,466 people from the late 1990s to 2012 using data from comprehensive dental examinations. They found that participants who were diagnosed with periodontitis had a 24% increase in the risk of developing cancer compared to those with either no or mild gum disease.

The researchers also found that the association was strongest for lung cancer, followed by colorectal cancer—even when adjusted for cigarette smoking, which is a known cause of cancer. In fact, they found that those subjects with no history of smoking who were diagnosed with periodontitis still had an increased risk of lung and colorectal cancer. No associations were found for risk of breast, prostate, or blood and lymphatic cancer. The study is also notable because it used dental exams to measure and classify the severity of gum disease, whereas many previous studies relied on self-reporting.

While the researchers admit that the presence of periodontitis does not necessarily mean that one will develop cancer, they point to the importance of further study into the connection, as well as the importance of maintaining healthy gums. Gum disease, which is also called gingivitis in its early stages, results when bacteria in plaque—the film that forms in the mouth and can adhere to teeth—builds up between the teeth and gums, causing the gums surrounding the teeth to become inflamed. If the inflammation is not treated and becomes more severe, it can cause the gums and supporting bone structure to deteriorate, leading to gum recession, pocketing (or separation of the gum from the tooth, allowing bacteria to collect under the gums and along the roots), and worst case—tooth loss. Signs of gum disease include bleeding or puffy gums, loose or shifting teeth, bad breath or a bad taste that won't go away, and receding gums. If you notice any of these symptoms, see your dentist.

Decrease your risk of gum disease (and potentially cancer) by brushing at least twice a day for two minutes each session with a fluoridated toothpaste and flossing every day, along with visiting your dentist twice a year. These dental essentials will keep your oral health in check, which in turn will help keep the rest of you on a healthier path.

