

SMOKING & ORAL HEALTH

Although most people are aware of the health risks associated with smoking, there is convincing scientific evidence linking smoking and a range of oral (mouth and throat) problems. Dentists have a role to play in promoting oral health and that is why we ask you to think about your tobacco habits and advise you to stop smoking.

Changes of Appearance

Many of the effects of smoking on your mouth are easy to see. Some of the effects are reversible and can provide a way of monitoring your improvements in oral health.

- Palate: heavy smokers may develop a pale or white hard palate often combined with red dots. This is due to a tightening of small blood vessels and disappears 3 months after quitting.
- Cheeks & Gums: the same melanin pigment that gives you a suntan can also cause small brown patches in the mouth. The colour takes a year to return to normal after quitting.
- White patches: tobacco irritates and can thicken the skin of the cheeks, gums, palate and under the tongue. Tobacco related white patches should disappear several months after quitting.
- Bad breath, changes in taste and smell: improve within a few days of quitting.
- Staining: of teeth and white fillings. A dentist or hygienist can polish these.
- Calculus: makes teeth rough and hard to clean; you will need less frequent scaling if you quit.
- Gum recession: smokers have greater shrinkage of the gum line and this effect is permanent.
- Acute necrotising ulcerative gingivitis (or ANUG): this painful condition can destroy the gum between the teeth and cause bad breath.

Gum Disease

- Smoking stops gums bleeding when they are irritated by plaque and thus hides the early signs of gum inflammation (gingivitis). Smokers are 3 and 6 times more likely to develop severe gum disease (periodontitis) compared to non-smokers and treatment is less likely to be successful.
- Many dental studies have shown that smokers develop more severe periodontitis, lose more of their supporting tissues and lose more teeth at a younger age. Chemicals in tobacco weaken the body's immune system and slow down the healing process. Smokers often suffer from recurrent gum problems. These effects are reversible if you quit.
- Stopping smoking improves the results of all types of gum treatment.
- Your gums may bleed more when you first stop smoking as your circulation improves. This bleeding will reduce if you continue to thoroughly clean in between the teeth and at the gum line.

Oral Cancer

- More than 8,000 people develop oral cancer each year in this country. Many cases of throat and mouth cancer are linked to the combined effects of excess smoking and alcohol use. Cigar and pipe smoking are as harmful as cigarettes in respect to your oral health.
- If you stop smoking, the increased risk of cancer drops to a half within 5 years. Early detection increases the chances of survival. See your dentist if you notice a red or white patch, or painless ulcer, in your mouth that doesn't heal in a few weeks.

If you are planning to quit

- We have further information sheets on Nicotine Replacement Therapy and Zyban.
- Phone NHS free smoking helpline on 0800 022 4322 (7 days a week 7am-11pm) for friendly, confidential and practical advice- calls are free. Alternatively visit www.smokefree.nhs.uk.
- Visit your GP.