

Ask the Dentist

Got a question for a dentist?

If you have a question you would like answered by a Ministry of Health-approved dentist, send it to us at enquiries.anjar@gmail.com. This issue, your questions are answered by **Dato' Dr. How Kim Chuan** and **Dr. David Tan** of Imperial Dental Specialist Centre.

Plaque Plague

My husband has thick films of plaque at the back of his lower front teeth. He has tried to brush these regions, but the plaque doesn't seem to reduce. We've read online that the only way to decrease such problems is through scaling. If this is true, what's the importance of undergoing regular scaling, and will treatments be uncomfortable? In addition, will they cost an arm and leg?
Ika, Kota Kinabalu



It is actually quite common for plaque to accumulate at the back of the lower teeth as it is challenging to brush that region well. Patients who have teeth crowding or missing teeth will have even more difficulty. Leaving the plaque for about a week will lead to calculus/tartar formation. Calculus/tartar is the hardened form of plaque. Your husband may still be able to remove the fresh plaque when it is still soft with a proper brushing technique, and flossing. However, once it has hardened, it is almost impossible to remove by just brushing.

Plaque and calculus/tartar can accumulate above or/and below the gum line. There is bad bacteria in it, so that's why leaving plaque on the gums will lead to gingivitis. This gum disease will turn the gums red because they will become inflamed. Gums will also bleed easily while brushing. If gingivitis is left untreated, and there is no improvement of oral hygiene, the patient may develop a more serious gum infection called periodontitis. Periodontitis damages the soft tissue and destroys the bone that supports the teeth, which can cause teeth to loosen or lead to tooth loss.

Therefore it is always important to go for regular dental checkups to detect/prevent caries (tooth cavity) and gum infection. Your husband's dentist will help him to remove plaque and calculus by scaling. He may experience some sensitivity while the dentist scales his teeth, especially when the calculus is very thick. However after a few rounds of regular scaling, he will get used to it, or even better, won't experience sensitivity anymore while scaling.

Treatment cost will depend on your husband's oral hygiene and gum condition. If his oral hygiene is acceptable, with some plaque and calculus, a normal scaling will do. Price varies depending on the clinic, but will usually cost around a hundred Ringgit. However, if he already has a serious gum disease, a deep scaling will be done and will cost more. Despite regular scaling, practicing good oral hygiene daily is still very important. Patients will be taught how to brush properly, or advised to use an electric toothbrush.

The Wrong Kind Of Sensitive

I'm a 30-year old female professional. I've recently been experiencing progressive tooth sensitivity, and now have difficulty eating ice cream or drinking cold drinks. This problem is both troubling and mind-boggling because I've never had these issues before. Why am I experiencing tooth sensitivity now, and what treatments or home remedies can I try in order to reduce discomfort?
Ming, Sungai Buloh

You may be experiencing something called dentinal hypersensitivity. There is a high chance that your gums might have receded, and the root of the teeth have become slightly exposed. The tooth root surface contains many microscopic pores that radiate outwards from the pulp where the nerves are. Those pores are exposed when the gums are no longer covering them.

Basically when you eat ice cream or drink cold drinks, there will be changes in the flow of the fluid present inside those pores, and this can trigger the nerve receptors which in turn cause short, sharp pains. The cause of receding gums is usually due to an improper brushing method. Patients that brush wrongly with medium/hard toothbrush bristles and strong force are more prone to suffering from receding gums. If this practice is prolonged, it may lead to small cavities along the neck area of the teeth due to abrasion. The root layer is basically softer and not protected by enamel. Therefore, that layer can be gradually be scrapped off with improper brushing, resulting in closer proximity to the pulp.

To remedy this condition, you can start using toothpastes that are meant for sensitive teeth. Some contain ingredients that will desensitize the nerves, while some will block those pores. However I do strongly recommend that you visit your dentist to detect the severity of gum recession, and check for the presence of cavities. Dental caries (tooth decay) can cause pain too. If you do have any cavities, they have to be filled. Your dentist will also teach you how to brush with the proper method in order to prevent further damage to your gums and teeth.

