

Gingival recession

Causes and treatment

You can have a healthy mouth and practice good oral hygiene, and yet experience a condition called gingival (gum) recession. Healthy gingival tissue forms a protective collar around a tooth. When gingival tissue recedes, exposing the tooth's root, sensitivity may result. Tooth root decay (root caries) may develop because the softer root surface decays more readily than the enamel on the tooth's crown.

There are two types of gingiva in the mouth: attached gingiva—the thick, pink tissue that hugs the teeth and is attached firmly to the underlying bone—and the mucosa, or unattached gingiva, the soft, thin, moveable tissue that makes up the inside of the lips and cheeks.

Gingival recession occurs when the edge of the gingival tissue (called the gingival margin) moves away from the crown of the tooth.

CAUSES OF GINGIVAL RECESSION

One of the main causes of gingival recession is an irregular or abnormal tooth position. A tooth may protrude because it was crowded when permanent teeth began to push through the gingivae. As a result, inadequate jaw bone covers the tooth's root. The condition sometimes is noticeable by age 10 years.

Heredity is another factor. A person simply may have thin, fragile or insufficient gingival tissue. Other causes of recession include aggressive or excessive toothbrushing, trauma to gingival tissues and periodontal disease.

TREATMENTS

When minor recession is ignored, continued recession and bone loss around teeth are likely. Treatment methods vary according to the type and severity of recession. If it is due to excessive or aggressive brushing, a dental office staff member can show you more effective oral hygiene methods.

Soft-tissue graft surgery (called gingival or gum grafts) and other procedures help create more attached gingiva to prevent gingival recession from progressing and to help regenerate and re-establish root coverage.

During a tissue graft, the dentist removes a thin piece of gingival tissue from the roof of the

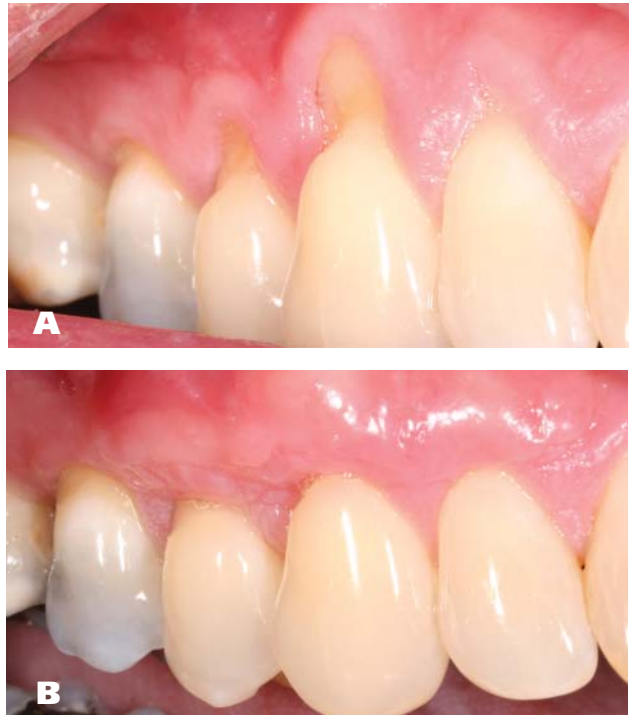


Figure. Before (A) and after (B) tissue grafts (photographs published with permission of Dr. Bernard W. Murray).

patient's mouth or another site in the mouth and grafts it to the site where the gingival tissue has receded. In some cases, freeze-dried tissue products or synthetic membranes may be used.

Tissue grafts may be performed around one or more teeth. Creating gingival tissue reduces the likelihood of further recession, helps cover exposed roots, enhances the appearance of the gum line and prevents or treats root sensitivity.

If recession is due to periodontal disease, the first step usually involves a special cleaning, called scaling and root planing. For many patients, this treatment—along with excellent oral hygiene at home and regular dental checkups—can help stop periodontal disease and prevent further gingival loss.

For more information about oral health, visit www.ada.org/public/index.asp. ■

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