



Optimal Oral Health

THE PANKEY INSTITUTE ■ ONE CRANDON BLVD. ■ KEY BISCAIYNE, FLORIDA 33149

PERIODONTAL HEALTH

By Steve Ratcliff, DDS, Director, Academic Affairs

An early focus for you and your dentist and hygienist will be helping you to create the healthiest possible periodontium, or gums and supporting bone. You may very likely already be doing a great job with your home care, and visits to the hygienist are routine and uneventful. However, if that is not the case, your dentist and hygienist will want to help you learn ways to improve the health of the tissues before moving forward with definitive restorative care.

Healthy gums are a light pink color and firm to the touch. People with dark skin may have darker coloration in their gums, which is also normal. The gum should come to a knife-edge at the neck of the tooth and should not be receding and exposing part of the root. Bleeding when brushing or flossing is a sure sign that something is not right and is in need of attention.

The best dentists will probe around each tooth in your mouth during a comprehensive evaluation. There is a cuff around each tooth that is no more than 3mm deep when gum is healthy. In the presence of periodontal disease, that cuff gets deeper and becomes a periodontal pocket.

When the pocket becomes 5mm in depth, the bone around the tooth is in danger of dying and resorbing away. Teeth with very deep periodontal pockets may become loose. With no intervention for advancing periodontal disease, the final result is loss of the involved teeth. The probing your dentist does measures how deep that cuff is at 6 points around each tooth.

Depending on the stage of disease present, treatment may be as simple as very thorough scaling and polishing of tooth surfaces and an improved home care routine, or as complex as surgical procedures to save your teeth.

However you and your dentist have decided to proceed, the process will begin with you having a complete understanding of your present condition followed by time with the hygienist to start the initial therapies. If the course of treatment is to be completed without surgery, it is likely that your hygienist will finish it. If surgery is indicated, then a referral to a periodontist will likely follow.

When a referral takes place, your dentist and the periodontist will have detailed discussion regarding the course of treatment you have started. Together the three of you will work to achieve your goals and objectives.

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In extensive restorative cases, it may be necessary for your dentist to prepare teeth and place provisional restorations prior to you seeing the periodontist. These provisional (sometimes called "temporary") restorations allow the dentist and periodontist to work to achieve the best end result for your circumstances.

The final result always is largely dependent on what you do to take care of your mouth at home. Nothing the dentist, hygienist, or specialists do will overcome a lack of personal care at home. Most people recognize that the time they invest in their oral health care at home is a small price to pay to protect the large investment of time, money and effort they have made in their mouth, and the long-term health, function, comfort, and beauty of their mouth.