Deep Cleaning for Gum Disease

Shared by Dr. Michael Perona

Root planing (often called "scaling and root planing" or "deep cleaning") is the standard first treatment for gum disease that has caused pockets to form around your teeth. It works by cleaning plaque and hard buildup (calculus/tartar) off the tooth root surfaces below the gum line, where a regular cleaning can't reach. Cochrane + 2

Why it's recommended for you

This treatment is recommended when:

- Your gum pockets are 4 mm or deeper and your gums bleed or show other signs of swelling or infection when checked. Periodontology … + 1
- There is buildup on the tooth roots below the gum line, seen on x-rays or during an exam. Periodontology + 1
- You have mild to moderate gum disease — in these cases, a thorough deep cleaning plus good daily brushing and flossing is often all that's needed, without surgery. Periodontology …

What to expect

- For pockets that start out at 4–6 mm deep, this cleaning typically shrinks them by about 1 to 1.5 mm and helps the gum reattach to the tooth by about 0.5 to 1 mm.
- For deeper pockets (7 mm or more), it typically shrinks them by about 2 to 2.5 mm, with more reattachment gain. Periodontology …
- Your gums will be checked again about 4 to 8 weeks after the cleaning. The main thing being checked is whether the swelling and bleeding have gone away — not just how smooth the roots feel. Lancet + 1
- For mild to moderate gum disease, this cleaning is often enough on its own. Surgery adds little extra benefit in these milder cases. Lancet + 1

If deeper pockets remain

If pockets stay 5 mm or deeper and your gums still bleed or show signs of infection after the deep cleaning has fully healed, surgery to access and clean the area more thoroughly may be considered. Periodontology + 1 Surgery may also be needed for more severe gum

disease or in areas where the tooth roots are harder to reach, such as where roots branch apart. Periodontology + 1

About antibiotics

Antibiotics — either pills or medicine placed directly in the gum pockets — are not routinely recommended alongside deep cleaning, because the added benefit is usually small and inconsistent. One exception with support from dental guidelines is a low-dose form of the antibiotic doxycycline taken by mouth, which can be used as an add-on in some cases. Cochrane + 2 Whether an antibiotic add-on makes sense for you is something to discuss with your clinician.

Keeping results long-term

After treatment, ongoing gum maintenance visits — including touch-up cleaning as needed — are important to keep the gains from this treatment and prevent the disease from coming back. American Denta… + 1

One more note: a routine cleaning and polish (the kind done at a regular dental checkup) is not the same as this deeper treatment and is not a substitute for it when true gum pockets and buildup below the gum line are present. Cochrane

References

1. Treatment of Periodontitis for Glycaemic Control in People With Diabetes Mellitus.
   The Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews. 2022. Simpson TC, Clarkson JE, Worthington HV, et al.

2. Periodontal Diseases.
   Lancet. 2005. Pihlstrom BL, Michalowicz BS, Johnson NW.

3. Evidence-Based Clinical Practice Guideline on the Nonsurgical Treatment of Chronic Periodontitis by Means of Scaling and Root Planing With or Without Adjuncts.
   Journal of the American Dental Association. 2015. Smiley CJ, Tracy SL, Abt E, et al. Guideline

4. Host response modulation in periodontics.
   Periodontology 2000. 2008. Preshaw PM.

5. Supportive Periodontal Therapy (SPT) for Maintaining the Dentition in Adults Treated for Periodontitis.
   The Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews. 2018. Manresa C, Sanz-Miralles EC, Twigg J, Bravo M.

6. A Re-Evaluation of Scaling and Root Planing.

Journal of Periodontology. 2021. Cobb CM, Sottosanti JS.

7. Scaling and root planing vs. conservative surgery in the treatment of chronic periodontitis.
   Periodontology 2000. 2016. Deas DE, Moritz AJ, Sagun RS, Gruwell SF, Powell CA.

8. Post-treatment supportive care for the natural dentition and dental implants.
   Periodontology 2000. 2016. Armitage GC, Xenoudi P.

9. Routine Scale and Polish for Periodontal Health in Adults.
   The Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews. 2018. Lamont T, Worthington HV, Clarkson JE, Beirne PV.