SYMPTOM

Swollen gums

Swollen gums look puffy or enlarged and may feel sore or bleed

WHAT IT FEELS LIKE
Puffy, tender gums that may bleed easily

WHERE IT IS FELT
Around or between the teeth

MOST COMMON CAUSES
Plaque-related gingivitis, trapped food, local irritation

WHEN IT IS URGENT
Facial swelling, fever, or rapidly worsening pain

USUALLY LASTS
Days to weeks, based on irritation and gum health

SEE A DOCTOR IF
Swelling persists, returns, or comes with repeated bleeding

Overview

Swollen gums are gums that look puffy, enlarged, or redder than usual. They may feel tender and can bleed during brushing or cleaning between your teeth. Swelling may affect one small area or much of the gumline.

A common cause is gingivitis, which means inflammation of the gums. It often develops when plaque-a sticky layer of bacteria-collects around the teeth. Other causes include trapped food, irritation, hormonal changes, medicines, and dental infections.

Swollen gums are usually not an emergency, but they should not be ignored if they persist. Early gum problems are often easier to manage than advanced gum disease.

What it may feel or look like

Healthy gums are usually firm and fit closely around the teeth. Their natural colour differs among people and may range from pale pink to brown or darker shades.

Swollen gums may:

Swelling around one tooth may come with throbbing pain, sensitivity to hot or cold, pus, or pain

when biting. These symptoms need dental assessment because they can occur with an infection.

- Look puffy, rounded, shiny, or enlarged
- Feel sore, sensitive, or tender
- Bleed during brushing, flossing, or eating
- Cover more of a tooth than usual
- Cause bad breath or an unpleasant taste
- Pull away from the teeth or form deeper spaces around them

Common causes

Common causes

Plaque-related gingivitis is the most frequent explanation. Plaque that remains along the gumline irritates the gums. Tartar, which is hardened plaque, cannot be removed with ordinary brushing and usually requires professional cleaning.

Food trapped between teeth can cause a small, tender area of swelling. Rough brushing, forceful flossing, braces, dentures, or a sharp edge on a tooth or filling can also irritate the gums.

Hormonal changes during puberty or pregnancy can make gums more sensitive to plaque. This may lead to swelling or bleeding, but it is still worth discussing with a dentist.

Less common causes

Some medicines can make gum tissue grow larger, including certain medicines used for seizures, immune suppression, or blood pressure. Do not stop a prescribed medicine on your own. A dentist and the clinician who prescribed it can review your options.

Swelling over a partly emerged wisdom tooth may be caused by inflammation around the tooth, called pericoronitis. Mouth breathing, dry mouth, tobacco use, and poorly fitting dental appliances may also contribute.

Less often, swollen or bleeding gums are linked to a nutritional deficiency, blood disorder, immune condition, or another illness. These causes are more likely to be considered when swelling is unusual, widespread, persistent, or accompanied by symptoms elsewhere in the body.

Causes needing urgent attention

A dental abscess is a pocket of infection that can form beside a tooth or in the gum. It may

cause severe pain, pus, a bad taste, fever, or swelling that spreads into the face or jaw.

Advanced gum disease, called periodontitis, damages the tissues and bone supporting the teeth. Signs can include receding gums, loose teeth, pain while chewing, or pus around the gumline.

When to seek medical care

Arrange a routine dental appointment if the swelling lasts more than several days, keeps returning, or comes with repeated bleeding, persistent bad breath, receding gums, or changes in how your teeth fit together. Book sooner if a tooth feels loose or the swelling is painful.

Seek urgent, same-day dental or medical care if you have:

Call emergency services or go to an emergency department if swelling makes it difficult to breathe or swallow, spreads toward the eye or neck, or becomes extensive very quickly. These signs can mean an infection is affecting deeper tissues.

- Increasing gum, tooth, facial, or jaw swelling
- Fever or a general feeling of being unwell
- Severe or rapidly worsening pain
- Pus or a bad taste together with pain and swelling
- Difficulty opening your mouth

How the cause is found

A dentist will ask when the swelling began, whether it bleeds or hurts, and whether you have noticed pus, bad breath, loose teeth, or fever. They may also ask about pregnancy, tobacco use, recent dental treatment, health conditions, and medicines.

They will examine your teeth, gums, tongue, and the rest of your mouth. A small measuring tool may be used to check the spaces between your teeth and gums. Deeper spaces can be a sign that gum disease has affected the supporting tissues.

Dental X-rays may be needed if there is concern about an abscess, bone loss, an impacted tooth, or another problem below the gumline. If the appearance is unusual or a wider health problem is possible, the dentist may recommend assessment by a doctor or blood tests.

Treatment and self-care

Treatment depends on what is causing the swelling.

Gingivitis is usually treated with improved plaque removal and professional cleaning. More advanced gum disease may require deeper cleaning below the gumline, follow-up care, or treatment by a gum specialist.

An abscess may need drainage, root canal treatment, or removal of the affected tooth. Antibiotics like amoxicillin or doxycycline are sometimes used when infection is spreading or causing wider symptoms, but they do not replace treatment of the source.

If a medicine may be contributing, your prescriber and dentist can decide whether an alternative is appropriate. Never change or stop a prescribed medicine without advice.

While arranging care, you can:

Do not squeeze the swelling, try to drain it, or place aspirin directly on the gum. These actions can injure the tissue and will not treat the cause.

- Brush gently twice daily with fluoride toothpaste
- Clean between your teeth each day without forcing the floss
- Avoid tobacco and other products that irritate your mouth
- Choose softer foods if chewing is uncomfortable
- Follow the label when using an appropriate non-prescription pain reliever

What to expect

Mild irritation from trapped food may settle after the area is gently cleaned. Plaque-related swelling can improve over days to weeks once plaque and tartar are controlled, although professional cleaning may be needed.

Swelling caused by an abscess or advanced gum disease usually does not resolve fully without dental treatment. Pain may ease temporarily even when the underlying problem remains.

After treatment, regular brushing, cleaning between the teeth, and dental follow-up can reduce the chance of swelling returning. Your dentist may recommend more frequent reviews if you have periodontitis or another ongoing risk factor.

Common questions

Should I stop brushing if my gums bleed?

Usually, no. Plaque can worsen inflammation, so gentle cleaning remains important. Use a soft toothbrush and avoid scrubbing. If bleeding is heavy, persistent, or unexplained, arrange an assessment.

Are swollen gums normal during pregnancy?

Hormonal changes can make gums more likely to swell or bleed. This does not mean the symptoms should be dismissed. Regular dental care and careful plaque removal remain important during pregnancy.

What does swelling around one tooth mean?

Possible causes include trapped food, injury, gum disease, an abscess, or inflammation around an emerging wisdom tooth. Persistent swelling, significant pain, pus, fever, or facial swelling needs prompt dental care.

Can swollen gums go away on their own?

Minor irritation may improve after the cause is removed. Swelling linked to tartar, an abscess, medicine-related gum enlargement, or periodontitis usually requires professional assessment and treatment.

Sources

- National Institute of Dental and Craniofacial Research: Periodontal (Gum) Disease
- NHS: Gum disease
- NHS: Dental abscess
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: About Periodontal Disease
- American Academy of Periodontology: Gum Disease Information