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What Your Gums Are Trying to Tell You

Some symptoms like gum redness, puffiness and bleeding could have surprisingly little to do with your oral hygiene.

By Jessica Migala



Photo: Fotosearch/Getty Images



Pale Gums

What it could mean: You might want to order up a juicy burger or a giant spinach salad. When your body isn't producing enough red blood cells, you could be looking at anemia, says [John Moore, DDS, \(https://33smile.com/\)](https://33smile.com/) of Cosmetic Dental Associates in San Antonio. Gums should be nice and pink and being deficient in nutrients like iron or B12 could be a culprit, and you may also notice other symptoms like weakness, dizziness and fatigue. Talk with your doctor.

Swollen Gums

What it could mean: Your medications may be to blame. Dentists notice that certain Rx's, like those for epilepsy, seizure and high blood pressure, can "make gums puffy, and therefore, bleed during brushing," says Mazen Natour, DMD, MScD, (<http://natourdmd.com/>), NYC-based prosthodontist. A visit with your dentist to review a list of your meds could help to explain the bleeding. Then, see your doctor. In some cases, your physician may be able to suggest an alternative medication. If that's not possible, your best option is to redouble your commitment to brushing and flossing—even if the issue is meds related, it's still a gum problem so practicing good oral care is important—and schedule regular appointments with your dentist, he says.

Red, Sore Gums

What it could mean: Even though you brush and floss daily, you may still have gums that are red, swollen or bleed easily—and they may not heal as well. "In people with [type 2] diabetes, the gums can't fight for themselves," says Natour. "The saliva that bathes the teeth is high in glucose, which feeds the bacteria in their teeth." In this case, your dentist may send you to your doctor for a physical exam and blood tests.

White Spots on Your Gums

What it could mean: During a regular check-up, your dentist is on the lookout for any white or red lesions around and inside your mouth. "If we see a patch or lump of tissue that clearly doesn't belong there, we immediately think about the possibility of oral cancers," says Moore. For perspective, a white spot by itself doesn't indicate an oral cancer, and it can be from other causes like an allergic reaction or a canker sore, says Natour. But if oral cancer is suspected (other symptoms (<https://www.nidcr.nih.gov/health-info/oral-cancer/oral-cancer#PossibleSignsandSymptoms>)), include difficulty chewing or swallowing, ear pain and hoarseness), your dentist or doctor will order a biopsy. If you notice a spot that doesn't go away in two weeks, call your dentist for an exam.

Receding Gums

What it could mean: You'd never think that your teeth and breasts were linked, but there is, in fact, a twofold issue. With only 35.4 percent of working-age adults visiting the dentist regularly, that means many are missing out on the best way to prevent periodontal disease (<https://www.perio.org/consumer/types-gum-disease.html>) (in which bacteria breaks down gum tissue and bones). What's more: If you don't know you have periodontal disease—and here's the surprising connection—you also won't know that you're at an increased risk for breast cancer. A 2015 study.

(http://www.ada.org/~media/ADA/Science%20and%20Research/HPI/Files/HPIBrief_1014_4.

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found that having periodontal disease can raise your risk for breast cancer by 14 percent.

(<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4713270/>). (For former smokers, their odds

went up 36 percent.) Researchers say that the chronic inflammation caused by oral disease may be one factor driving cancer growth. You may notice your gums have formed pockets,

which allows for infection, and your teeth may loosen. Consider this your reminder to schedule your next dental exam, which is essential for preventing future problems.

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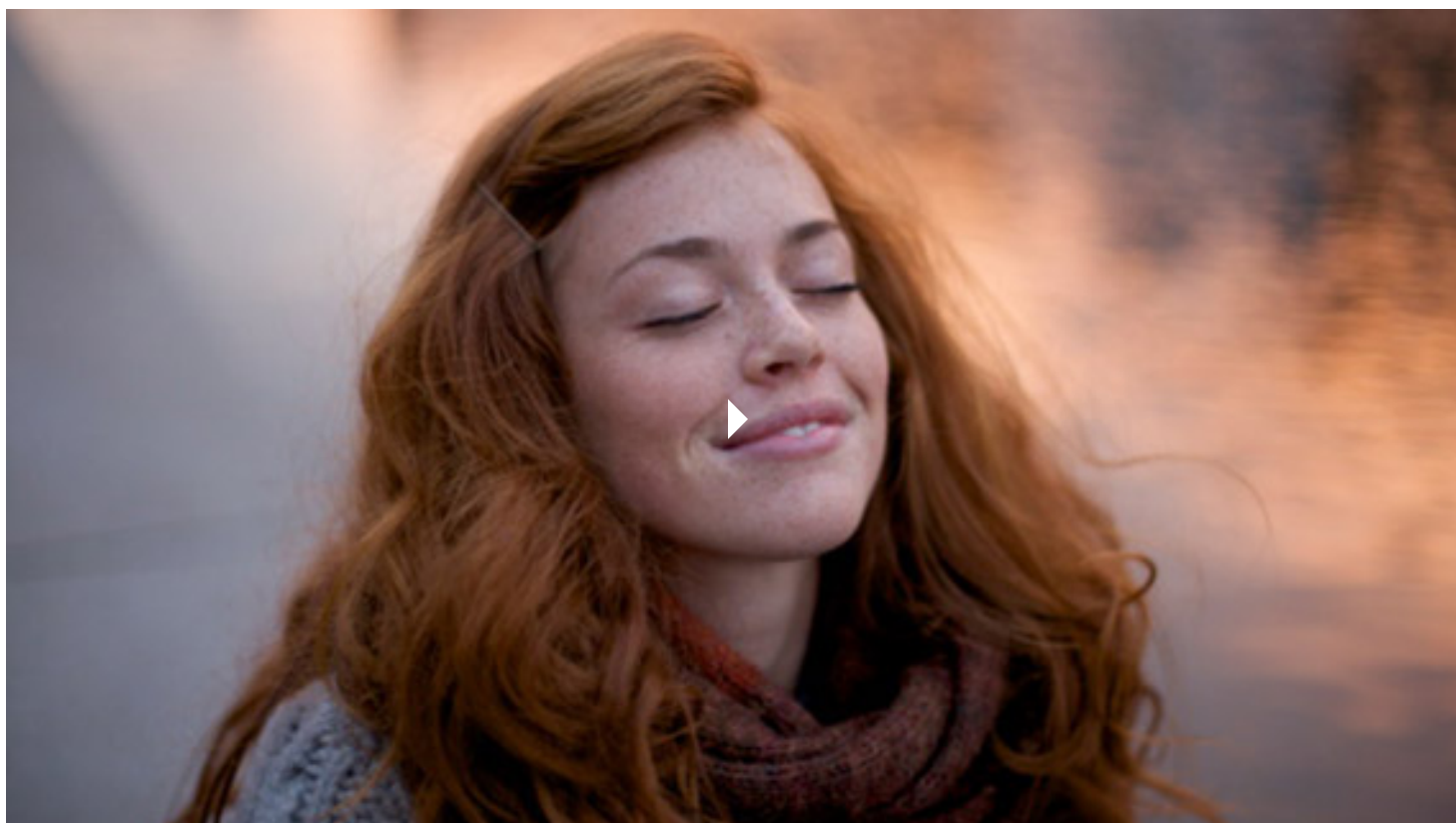
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