

How long does it take for a gum graft to heal?

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Takeaway

A gum graft is a type of dental surgery performed to correct the effects of gum recession. It is a quick and relatively simple surgery in which a periodontist removes healthy gum tissue from the roof of the mouth and uses it to build the gum back up where it has receded.

Gum recession occurs when gum tissue wears away, exposing more of the tooth at the root. This may cause increased sensitivity, especially when eating or drinking hot or cold foods. Because gum recession tends to happen slowly, many people do not realize it is happening to them.

If left untreated, gum recession could eventually lead to tooth loss.

Some people choose to have a gum graft for cosmetic reasons, such as to have a better smile; while for others, a gum graft is necessary to protect the exposed tooth from damage and repair any damage already done.

Procedure

There is a variety of gum grafts available, and the type of surgery undertaken depends on the extent and severity of damage and a person's individual needs.

A periodontist will discuss the different types of surgery available with the person to decide which option is the most suitable.

Before starting the gum graft, the periodontist will administer a local anesthetic to numb the area so that the procedure does not hurt.

They may also lift some of the existing gum away to expose the root of the tooth and clean it.

The three different types of gum graft surgery are:

Connective tissue grafts

In this procedure the periodontist:

- removes tissue from the roof of the mouth by making a flap and taking tissue from underneath the top layer
- stitches the tissue onto the existing gum tissue to cover the exposed tooth root
- stitches the flap on the roof of the mouth from where they took the tissue

Free gingival grafts

This is the preferred method for people with thin gums who require extra tissue to enlarge the gums.

In this procedure the periodontist:

- removes tissue directly from the top layer of tissue on the roof of the mouth
- stitches this tissue to the existing gum area



Different types of gum grafts are available.

Pedicle (lateral) grafts

This is the preferred method for people who have lots of gum tissue growing near the exposed tooth.

In this procedure the periodontist:

- grafts tissue from the gum around or near the tooth requiring treatment
- only partially cuts away this tissue, keeping one edge attached
- stretches the tissue over or down, covering the exposed tooth root and holding it in place with stitches

A periodontist may source the tissue from a tissue bank rather than removing gum tissue from a person's mouth.

Preparing for a gum graft surgery

Once the person and their dentist have considered all the options and decided on the type of surgery, there is not much that a person needs to do to prepare for the procedure.

However, it is essential to ensure a family member or friend is available to drive to and from the appointment.



Someone should drive the person home after the procedure.

This is important because the pain medication prescribed to manage the discomfort means it is unsafe for a person having gum graft surgery to drive.

People getting gum grafts will be able to go home right away after the procedure. A periodontist will discuss all the aftercare instructions to ensure the graft heals successfully.

Recovery

A person can aid recovery by:

- avoiding flossing or brushing at the treatment site

- using a special mouthwash which controls plaque build up
- taking antibiotics to reduce the risk of infection
- avoiding strenuous exercise
- avoiding foods that are hard to eat
- eating soft, cool foods, for example, ice cream, pasta, eggs, yogurt, and soft cheese
- avoiding smoking

The pain and discomfort a person experiences will vary. If the periodontist is using tissue from a tissue bank, for example, a person should feel minimal pain. If they remove the tissue from the roof of the mouth a person may feel pain for a few days.

The healing process is often quick, taking 1 to 2 weeks for the mouth to heal fully but may take longer. People can take over-the-counter (OTC) pain relievers or prescription medications to help manage any discomfort.

After the procedure, teeth may feel more sensitive than usual, particularly to hot and cold foods, and people may benefit from using desensitizing toothpaste or mouthwash.

Most people can return to work the following day.

A person will probably have a follow-up appointment with their dentist after surgery to check the healing process is progressing as it should. The dentist may also remove any stitches if necessary.

The gums will not only look different after surgery but may feel tighter and firmer too.

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Are there any complications?

Complications of gum graft surgery are minimal and uncommon.

It is, however, possible that people may experience the following:

- bleeding gums
- swollen gums
- teeth feeling looser (though this should only be temporary)
- sensitive teeth
- spaces appearing between the teeth
- infection

Occasionally, the graft tissue may not attach to the graft site properly. This is very rare, but if this happens a person might require repeat surgery.

Some people do not like the way their smile looks after their gum graft surgery. In these situations, the periodontist may be able to reshape the gums to help change the way they look.

When to seek help

People should call their dentist as soon as possible if they notice any symptoms that suggest the gums have become infected after surgery.

Symptoms of infection include:

- bleeding that continues for over 20 minutes, despite applying pressure
- unexpected pain, swelling, and bruising
- fever and pus



Consult a dentist if prolonged bleeding occurs.

Cost and insurance

Gum graft surgery varies in price.

The procedure cost usually depends on the type of surgery required.

People may be able to get all or part of the surgery paid for by their insurers if they have dental insurance. Insurance companies can provide estimates to give an idea of overall cost.

Is it necessary?

A person deciding whether to have gum graft surgery should consider the following:

- **Alternative treatments:** This may include tooth extraction if gum recession is already severe.
- **The cost of surgery:** If a person is considering surgery for cosmetic reasons alone, they will likely have to cover the cost of the operation from their own pocket.
- **Risks of not treating:** Untreated gum recession can lead to severe gum disease and eventual tooth loss. Gum disease can also cause additional problems, such as cardiovascular disease and diabetes.

By maintaining good oral hygiene, and visiting a dentist for routine checkups on a regular basis, a person can reduce their risk of developing gum disease and catching it early should it begin to develop.

Takeaway

Gum graft surgery is a procedure that helps to restore gums that have worn down, can help protect teeth, and improve the appearance of a person's smile.

There are different types of gum graft surgery available. All are relatively straightforward procedures with minimal risk of any complications.

People may feel some discomfort after surgery but should make a full recovery within 2 weeks.

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