Supportive periodontal care (scale and polish)

What is scaling?

Scaling is the removal of hard deposits from the surfaces of the teeth. Scaling is carried out by a dentist, dental therapist or hygienist.

Plaque is a soft, sticky substance that builds up on your teeth. It is mostly made up of bacteria.

The bacteria in plaque feed on sugar from food and drink, producing acids as a waste product. The acids attack the teeth by dissolving the minerals in the tooth surface. If this happens too often, tooth decay results.

And, if plaque is allowed to build up, the bacteria in it can cause gum disease, making your gums sore and infected.

Tartar (also known as 'calculus'), formed by hardened plaque, helps plaque to gather and makes it harder to remove when you brush.

You can't remove tartar just by brushing your teeth, but a dentist, dental therapist or hygienist can remove it using special instruments - this is known as scaling.

What is polishing?

A dentist, dental therapist or hygienist can also polish your teeth. This removes stains from coffee, tea, cigarettes or red wine; and it makes it more difficult for plaque to stick to your teeth.

If you clean your teeth very thoroughly at home, your scale and polish treatment will take less time.

What happens?

Dentists, dental therapists and hygienists use two types of precision instrument for scaling:

- Hand precision instruments are made of metal and come in different sizes and shapes, to reach different parts of the teeth. This is why you will see the dentist, dental therapist or hygienist changing instruments quite often.
- Sonic/ultrasonic precision instruments use a tip that vibrates very fast in a stream of water. The water is removed from your mouth using a small suction device. A hand precision instrument is also used along with a sonic/ultrasonic instrument, to check whether the teeth are completely clean.

For polishing, your dentist, dental therapist or hygienist will use a rotating brush or rubber polisher with a special toothpaste.

If you have periodontal disease, it may be necessary to carry out deep scaling (periodontal treatment) to clean root surfaces below the level of the gum. You may need a local anaesthetic prior to periodontal treatment.

Your dentist, dental therapist or hygienist will also tell you about the best way to clean your teeth and gums thoroughly at home.

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