

# There's surgical hope for the dreaded "gummy smile"

By Dr. Robert A. Levine

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Most people who have what's known as a "gummy smile" aren't happy about it. Their gums hide so much of their tooth enamel that they look "short-toothed." And that can be hard on a person's self-esteem – though most people don't realize how hard until it's been corrected.

Two patients of mine put it simply, Lilia, a 38-year-old businesswoman said, "I didn't like how I looked." For Mary Kay, a 39-year-old bookkeeper, the main problem was not just aesthetic, but her "red puffy gums."

Both women wanted more normal looking smiles. Because they had come to me for other periodontal work, I was able to tell them that the procedure for restoring their normal gumline was relatively simple.

They were amazed. No one had ever told them there was a "cure". Indeed, many dentists don't know that this often-genetic condition known as "excessive gingival display" (which affects 12 percent of all men and 18 percent of all women) can be corrected.

Frequently, it goes undiagnosed. So it's not surprising that my patients hadn't heard of "gummy smile surgery" either.

But once Lilia and Mary Kay learned they really could have a normal smile, both wanted the procedure as soon as possible.

The operation for gummy smile correction is, surgically speaking, a minor one and quite simple. Known medically as a "flap gingivectomy", it can be performed in a single office visit under local anesthesia.

First, tiny incisions are made in the gumline. Next the incised gum tissue is peeled back. Once lifted, it is recontoured into a more normal position on the tooth, using detailed measurements to ensure that both sides look the same. The new gumline follows the patient's smile – usually extending from the first molar on one side to the first molar on the other.

For most people, this outpatient procedure requires no special post-operative care. Patients can eat (soft foods, at first) and drink as they normally would, while returning to work the next day. The only pain medication required is Ibuprofen, as needed, for the first four or five days. Full recovery of the gum tissue usually takes between one and two weeks.

In some cases, a follow-up procedure is needed to "polish up" the new smile. Both Mary Kay and Lilia required crowns and/or porcelain veneers on their newly exposed enamel to create an even smile – and to provide the final cosmetic touches to the procedure. Mary Kay needed to replace all of her older crowns, while Lilia required two new veneers and one crown to produce the vibrant results she wanted.

In other cases, the typically hereditary condition of excessive gum tissue – in which the gums do not recede normally as the adult teeth first erupt – can be complicated by contributing conditions. A patient may have an upper jaw that is incorrectly positioned and requires jaw surgery. But, in most cases, the procedure alone will produce a positive and desired result.



**Dr. Levine**

Yet it should be remembered that "gummy smile" surgery isn't just about the desire for a more appealing smile. It isn't all cosmetic, in other words. There can be sound health-maintenance reasons for having a gingivectomy performed. Here's why: People whose gum tissue does not recede normally as their adult teeth appear often develop what's known as deep "pseudo pockets" in their gums. These pockets can become breeding grounds, so to speak, for periodontal disease (especially if there is a family history of this problem.) Removing these pockets by recontouring the gums to a normal depth removes this potential cause of future periodontal disease.

Still, I think most of my patients would say that "gummy smile" surgery has meant a lot more to them than health maintenance. In fact, I treated a young man – a teenager – who was too self-conscious to ask a young woman for a date. It was quite remarkable to me that his post-surgical self-confidence soared. Not only is he able to ask for dates, but girls his age apparently are chasing him.

As Mary Kay told me after surgery had healed, "When I smile now, I have a real smile. You don't see all that gum."

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## Gummy Smile

An unattractive smile will result when excessive gum tissue covers too much of the enamel. This makes teeth appear to be too short and causes the gummy smile. This is easily corrected with conservative Periodontal Plastic Surgery.

The excessive gum tissue is removed to expose the normal length of the tooth. Occasionally the underlying bone must be reduced to prevent subsequent regrowth of the gum tissue.

Correcting this with Periodontal Plastic Surgery will result in:

- teeth that no longer look like "baby teeth"
- teeth that no longer appear too short
- a much more attractive smile
- often a markedly enhanced self-image

Healing is rapid and the esthetic result is evident one week after surgery.

### Before Periodontal Plastic Surgery



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