



Dental Care: Oral Hygiene

By age 17, 78 percent of American children have experienced tooth decay, and more than 51 million school hours are lost each year due to dental-related illness.

Oral health problems—ranging from cavities to cancer—are painful and costly, and affect millions of people each year. This is alarming because almost all oral diseases can be prevented with the proper knowledge and prevention techniques.

Tooth Decay

For children, cavities are a common problem that can strike at an early age. Untreated cavities can cause pain and infection, which can lead to difficulty eating, speaking, playing and learning.

Tooth decay is also a problem for adults, especially for the increasing number who retain most of their teeth throughout their lives. In addition, tooth loss can become an issue as adults get older. Tooth loss can affect self-esteem and may contribute to nutrition problems by limiting the types of food that someone can eat.

In addition, poor oral hygiene can lead to a number of diseases and conditions, including gum disease, oral cancer and more.

Prevention

Keep your oral health in good shape by practicing the following:

- Drink fluoridated water and use fluoride toothpaste. Fluoride's protection against tooth decay works at all ages.
- Take care of your teeth and gums. Thoroughly brushing and flossing can reduce dental plaque and prevent gingivitis—the mildest form of gum disease.
- Avoid tobacco. In addition to the many other health risks posed by tobacco, smokers have four times the risk of developing gum disease as non-smokers. Tobacco use in any form—cigarette, pipe or smokeless spit tobacco—increases the risk for gum disease, oral and throat cancers, and an oral fungal yeast infection called candidiasis. Spit tobacco containing sugar also increases the risk of tooth decay.

- Limit alcohol consumption. Heavy use of alcohol is also a risk factor for oral and throat cancers. When used alone, alcohol and tobacco are risk factors for oral cancers, but when used in combination the effects are even greater.
- Eat wisely. Adults should avoid snacks with sugars and starches. Limit the number of snacks eaten throughout the day. The recommended five-a-day helping of fiber-rich fruits and vegetables stimulates your salivary flow to aid in the re-mineralization of tooth surfaces with early stages of tooth decay.
- Visit the dentist regularly. Check-ups can detect early signs of oral health problems and can lead to treatments that will prevent further damage, and in some cases, reverse the problem. Professional tooth cleaning, called prophylaxis, is also important for preventing oral problems, especially when self-care is difficult.
- If you have diabetes, maintain control of the condition. This will help prevent complications from the disease, including an increased risk of gum disease.
- Ask your doctor if other drugs may be substituted if your medications produce a dry mouth. If dry mouth is unavoidable, drink plenty of water, chew sugarless gum and avoid tobacco and alcohol.
- Have an oral health check-up before beginning cancer treatment. Radiation to the head or neck and chemotherapy can cause problems for your teeth and gums. Treating existing oral health problems before cancer therapy may help prevent or limit oral complications or tissue damage.