Dental decay and oral care

Dental plaque

Plaque is a soft, sticky film that attaches to teeth and contains bacteria. Most of us have about 8 billion bacteria in our mouths. These bacteria double in population every 30 minutes and feed off sugars and refined carbohydrates to produce acid and other toxins. These lead to decay and the destruction of the gums and bone around the teeth.

Acids penetrate below the tooth surface and minerals are lost. Natural recovery or remineralisation can replace some minerals lost, and this “attack and recovery process occurs every time we eat.

If the “attack” outweighs the “recovery,” the damage becomes visible. It starts out as white spots on the teeth, often along the gum line. These white spots then become holes and turn brown or black.

Prevention

Fluoride

Fluoride in the water supply and toothpaste helps prevent tooth decay, repair early decay, and prevent cavities from getting larger.

Saliva

Saliva is our natural protection against oral acids. However, saliva produced at mealtimes has a 60 times greater ability to protect against decay than saliva produced between meals or when we are asleep. Therefore, the worst time to eat something sweet is between meals.

Anything that reduces salivary flow can lead to increased decay, erosion, and gum disease. Chewing sugar-free gum for 20 minutes after eating will help increase saliva flow to neutralise acid. Drinking lots of water daily is essential to prevent dehydration and dry mouth.

Prevention

Eat a healthy diet.

Limit between-meal snacks and make healthy choices such as fruit, cheese, and nuts. Avoid acidic drinks such as soft drinks, cola drinks, sports drinks, lemon juice and other fruit juices.

Brush twice a day.

Most people brush too hard and too fast.

- Use a pea-sized amount of toothpaste on a soft toothbrush.
- Place the toothbrush at a 45° angle over your teeth and gums.
- Use a gentle circular motion over every tooth, concentrating on the gumline.
- Repeat on the inside surfaces.
- Use a light back-and-forth motion on the chewing surfaces.
- You don't need to rinse after brushing as the small amount of fluoridated toothpaste left Will continue to protect your teeth, so just spit.

If you have exposed your teeth to acid, delay brushing them for 40 minutes to allow saliva to stabilise the tooth enamel.

Flossing

Flossing is critical to removing plaque from between your teeth, where your toothbrush can't reach. It should be done once a day.

Visit your dentist regularly.

Regular visits to your dentist will ensure your teeth and gums are kept in optimal condition by alerting you to signs of early decay. If decay is present, your dentist will advise on stopping it from progressing.

Once plaque hardens, it becomes calculus (tartar), a calcified substance that regular brushing cannot remove. Your dentist uses professional cleaning instruments to remove calculus from tooth surfaces.

Important to know

- This page contains general information about dental decay. It cannot replace individualised advice from your dental practitioner. Please consult your dentist for specific recommendations about your oral health and necessary treatments.

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