

Oral Health Digest

INFORMATION FOR PATIENTS PROVIDED BY THE EXPERT FACULTY AT NYU COLLEGE OF DENTISTRY

FEBRUARY 2018

Cavities Are Preventable!

What is tooth decay and what causes it?

Tooth decay is the disease known as caries or cavities. Unlike other diseases, however, caries is not life threatening and is highly preventable.

Tooth decay starts long before a cavity is seen and starts with a white frost spot on your teeth. Small cavities should be treated without fillings using home care, diet, and fluoride. A filling can be prevented and the decay reversed! If not detected and treated early, cavities will grow larger and require fillings to restore the tooth. If large cavities are allowed to grow, they may eventually reach deep inside the tooth. This can lead to infection, pain, and tooth loss.

Some typical causes of tooth decay include the following:

- When we don't brush and clean, food particles and debris on our teeth form plaque, containing bacteria.
- When exposed to sugar (from candy, sugary drinks, and even juices), naturally occurring bacteria on teeth produce acid.
- Acid dissolves tooth enamel.
- Loss of enamel leads to cavities (holes) in the teeth.



by Mark S. Wolff, DDS, PhD
Professor and Chair, Department of Cariology and Comprehensive Care

You can prevent tooth decay. Here's how:

- Eat a balanced diet that is low in sugars. Even healthful foods like fruit juices and raisins contain lots of sugars!
- Avoid sipping sugary drinks and snacking on sugary foods between meals.
- If you must eat sweets, eat them with your meals, not all day long!
- Brush your teeth twice a day with fluoride toothpaste — use an electric toothbrush if you find it easier.
- Floss or use another between-the-teeth cleaner every day.
- Drink fluoridated water.
- If you chew gum, chew **sugarless** gum. Chewing sugarless gum after snacks and meals stimulates saliva to clear the sugars from your mouth.
- If you use mouthwash, make sure it contains fluoride.
- Visit your dentist regularly for cleanings, checkups, and periodic X-rays.

Keeping your mouth healthy will help keep your whole body healthy. Remember, you are never too old to get cavities or to prevent them! ■



by Debra M. Ferraiolo, DMD
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Your Dentist Can Help Detect Diabetes



and Analia Veitz-Keenan, DDS
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It had been years since José had visited a dentist when he appeared for an emergency visit. He had been complaining of **bad breath and said that all his teeth felt loose**. In our conversation, we discovered that he had been following a poor diet that had caused him to gain weight. He also complained that he had to go to the bathroom frequently and always felt hungry and thirsty. After examining him it became clear that the condition of his gums was poor and that his remaining teeth did not have a good prognosis.

Listening to his symptoms, we decided to check his blood sugar by performing a simple test: a small prick to extract a drop of his blood. **We were astonished by what the machine showed**. We tested two more times for confirmation, and found that his sugar was unquestionably too high, way above normal.

As dentists, we cannot diagnose the disease for certain, but we can refer patients to physicians

and specialists. After further evaluation by José's physician, our suspicions were confirmed. **José had diabetes**.

Tell your dentist if you suspect that you may suffer from similar symptoms. Your dentist can detect signs and symptoms during a dental check-up.

When treating severe periodontal disease, where extremely loose teeth are difficult to control with only dental treatment, we often think that the patient may be suffering from diabetes. In older patients, recurrent infections in the mouth that do not heal can be related to diabetes too. Because not all patients see their physicians regularly, many times the dentist can be the first to detect disease. **Diabetes can cause problems in your mouth**.

In addition to gum problems, some problems may occur as a side effect of medications used to treat diabetes. Some of these medications can decrease saliva, which creates **a feeling of "dry mouth" that**

can lead to other problems, including:

- Inability to taste and enjoy food
- Irritation of gum, cheeks, lips, and palate
- Sores or ulcers
- Burning sensation on tongue
- Enlarged, infected salivary glands
- More cavities in teeth

Our recommendations

Keep in mind that not all people with diabetes suffer from gum disease, and not all people with gum disease have diabetes.

We recommend regular dental check-ups and good oral hygiene habits for everyone. And if you have been diagnosed with any type of diabetes, maintain good sugar control to minimize the progression of diabetes and gum disease, exercise regularly, and take the medications your doctor prescribes to prevent and control your diabetes. ■

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To Achieve the Best Oral Health for Your Child, Follow These Tips



by Amr M. Moursi, DDS, PhD
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At each step of your child's life, parents can take the following steps to ensure a lifetime of good oral health for their children.

Pregnancy

- Effective prevention of cavities and oral infections during pregnancy can significantly improve the oral health not only of the mother but of her children as well.

Infancy (Birth to 12 months)

- Clean your infant's gums and teeth with a washcloth or soft infant brush at least two times a day.
- Using the bottle as a pacifier can lead to tooth decay. Milk and juices contain natural sugar that can lead to tooth decay. Do not put your child down to sleep or a nap with anything but water.**
- From six months to age 3, your child may have sore gums when teeth erupt. Many children like a clean, chilled teething ring, cool spoon, or cold wet washcloth.
- Sucking on a thumb or pacifier are natural habits, and newborns derive satisfaction from them. During the first year of life, these do not require intervention.
- During the first year of life, children should drink water and whole milk. Parents should limit other drinks to one half cup of 100% fruit juice per day and no fruit drinks.

Toddler (1 to 2 years)

- You should take your child to the dentist soon after the first tooth erupts, but no later than 1 year of age.**
- As soon as teeth appear in your child's mouth, brush them with a tiny smear of fluoride toothpaste and a soft toothbrush. Brush once in the morning after breakfast and right before bed.
- Trade a bottle for a cup by age one.

Adolescence (12 to 18 years)

- Mouth piercing can interfere with speech, chewing, or swallowing. It may cause excessive drooling, infection, chipped or cracked teeth, injuries to the gums, sensitivity to metals, and nerve damage. Consult your dentist before piercing.
- Discourage your child from using tobacco products. Tobacco use, including smoking and/or chewing, causes cancer, heart disease and other serious illnesses, in addition to discoloration of the teeth and bad breath.**
- Teenagers care a lot about their appearance. A dentist can make a chipped tooth look whole, change discolored teeth to a natural white, contour an oddly shaped tooth and even fill in the gaps between widely spaced teeth. ■

Pre-school (2 to 6 years)

- At age 3, you should continue to brush for your child and begin to use a pea-sized amount of fluoride toothpaste. If your child cannot spit well, continue to use a tiny smear of fluoride toothpaste.**
- Injuries to the primary (baby) teeth can affect the development of the permanent (adult) teeth. If an injury occurs, contact your dentist right away.
- Limit the total number of times per day that your child eats and drinks. Excessive snacking, even with healthy foods and drinks, can cause cavities.
- Limit sugary foods like soda, fruit juice and sweetened cereals. Encourage snacks such as fruits and vegetables, low fat yogurt, or whole grains.
- Use positive reinforcement, and other strategies recommended by your dentist, to help your child discontinue pacifier/thumb-sucking habits.

School-aged (6 to 12 years)

- Thumb sucking or a pacifier that continues past 5 or 6 years of age can lead to excessive overbite. Consult your dentist, who will assess the need for an orthodontic evaluation.
- Children can begin brushing independently at age 8 under a parent's supervision.
- Children should begin flossing independently around age 10 when their manual dexterity has developed.
- Sealants (a protective coating that covers the chewing surfaces of the teeth) may be placed on newly erupted permanent back teeth to help protect them from dental decay.**
- If your child plays a contact sport, he or she should wear a mouth guard to protect against dental injury and concussion.
- If a child's permanent tooth is dislodged during an injury, place it in a container of milk and bring your child to the dentist as soon as possible. Permanent teeth can sometimes be re-implanted successfully.