

Dental Health 101

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There are 4 main disease processes that are treated in dentistry. These categories also represent the top four ways in which we lose teeth as adults:

- 1) decay (cavities) - a bacterial infection of the

hard tooth structure. This is the major cause of tooth loss in children and the major cause of root canal infections in adults.

- 2) Periodontal (gum) disease - a bacterial infection of the soft tissues surrounding the tooth (gums) and the supporting bone (the tooth socket). This is the major cause of bad breath, bleeding gums and tooth loss in adults.
- 3) Traumatic occlusion (a bad bite) and bruxism - grinding, clenching of the teeth and an uneven bite can generate forces across the teeth can range from 100 to 600 pounds per square inch leading to premature tooth loss.
- 4) Trauma - such as motor vehicle accidents and blunt force trauma.

Accurate diagnosis is the only way to identify these disease processes early and treat them preventively. The diagnostic skills of your dentist are very important to your short and long term dental and overall health and appearance. A simple start is having regular hygiene visits to your dental office. The average number of times can vary from two to four times per year, depending on your current dental health. Your dentist should be able to recommend the correct frequency for you and explain why he has recommended it. It is critical that patients understand, however, that the absence of pain does not indicate the absence of disease. If you take your

automobile in for regular maintenance and oil changes, it is highly unlikely that you will have any unexpected problems, such as transmission failure, which can be frustrating and costly. It is for this same reason why it is so important to be examined approximately twice per year by your dentist at your "maintenance" or hygiene visits.

Since your hygienist will usually spend on average anywhere from 40 to 90 minutes with you, she should be able to clearly communicate any concerns to your dentist, who can then discuss options with you so you can make an informed decision. This will reduce the likelihood of any problem progressing to a point where you have pain, discomfort, lost time at work and fewer, if any options to save the tooth or teeth in question. Ensure that your dentist and his educated team take the time to be thorough and have the ability to see problems "early". As a patient it is also important to always communicate your own concerns about tooth or gum sensitivity, bleeding gums, grinding or clenching, pain, bad breath, as well as esthetic concerns that can affect your everyday life.



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Bruxism, whether at night or during the day, is a loosely used term that refers to an incessant grinding and clenching of the teeth, intentionally or unintentionally, and at inappropriate times. Unfortunately, "bruxers", or people who grind or clench their teeth, are often unaware that they have developed this habit, and often do not end up seeking treatment until damage to the mouth and teeth has been done. Similarly, a tooth that is not properly positioned within the dental arch absorbs more of that biting pressure than it should. An uneven bite is also associated with bruxism and studies have shown that this as well as bruxism, can greatly accelerate the painless loss of bone support for the teeth with existing gum disease, tooth loss due to excess forces, as well as early failure of implants, crowns, bridges and veneers.

Occasional bruxism may not be harmful if treated early with a simple bite guard or night guard. When it occurs regularly and it is not diagnosed or treated, it may be also associated with moderate to severe headaches, shoulder and

neck pain, facial pain, and disturbed sleep. Sometimes, patients may "adapt" and not have any "problems", even in advanced bruxism. Then, something as simple as increased stress, takes them beyond their adaptive capacity, leading to serious pain and other associated problems

The primary focus of your dentist is the prevention of oral diseases, maintaining of healthy teeth and gums, and treatment of common oral health problems as well as helping you understand the link between oral health and general health.

Your dentist will work with you to develop a customized dental hygiene plan that incorporates a complete dental examination, diagnostic x-rays and use of other diagnostic equipment to prevent, uncover or treat problems as early as possible. Your dentist may also incorporate a variety of restorative procedures in the development of a treatment plan that will help prevent decay or disease of the teeth, mouth and gums.

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