

Back-to-school checkup

Send your child off to school with a healthy mouth

Millions of children soon will head off to a new school year. Routine physical examinations, including hearing and vision tests, help ensure that students are in good health before school begins. When scheduling health care appointments, don't overlook a dental checkup for your child. A dental examination is as important as booster shots and should be a regular part of back-to-school preparations. Some states may require dental checkups at three-year intervals; other states have no requirements. However, children need to see their dentist at intervals recommended by their dentist. Many parents and caregivers don't realize that serious tooth decay is an infectious disease for which there is no immunization.

More than one-half of all children aged 5 to 9 years have at least one cavity or filling. A painful tooth or chronic dental problem can lead to difficulty in eating, speaking and concentrating. Children with chronic dental pain may not always voice their problem. They may appear anxious, depressed or tired, but teachers may not recognize their pain. Dental problems also cause many children to miss school.

Regular dental checkups and preventive dental care, such as cleanings and fluoride treatment, provide children with "smile" insurance. Routine dental examinations uncover problems that can be treated in the early stages, when damage is minimal and restorations may be small. This helps prevent painful, chronic conditions and saves money.

When necessary, radiographs (commonly called "X-rays") are taken to see how the teeth are developing and to spot hidden decay. Every child should have an orthodontic evaluation by age 7. Early examination and treatment may prevent or reduce the severity of malocclusions (or "bad

bite") in the permanent teeth.

Because children's needs differ, your dentist is best able to suggest a schedule of visits for your child. The frequency of dental visits will depend partly on the child's eating habits, how clean the teeth are kept, past treatment needs, whether the child drinks fluoridated water, and other factors that can affect the likelihood of dental diseases.

PROTECTING A HEALTHY SMILE

Dental sealants are another option for keeping teeth healthy. A sealant is a plastic material that the dentist applies to the chewing surfaces of the back teeth (the premolars and molars). Sealants form a barrier that protects teeth from plaque, a sticky film of acid-producing bacteria. Sealants hold up well under the force of normal chewing and usually last several years before a reapplication is needed.

Besides a dental checkup, your child may be due for a new toothbrush. The American Dental Association recommends replacing toothbrushes every three to four months, or sooner if bristles are worn. A worn toothbrush can't do a thorough job of cleaning teeth. Look for products that display the American Dental Association's Seal of Acceptance and select a child-sized toothbrush for ease of use.

Children may be able to brush their teeth by the age of 7 years, but may need supervision brushing until about age 10 or 11 years. Flossing removes plaque from between teeth, where a toothbrush can't reach. However, flossing is a more difficult skill to master. Floss your child's teeth until about age 10 years, after which he or she should be able to floss under adult supervision.

Many injuries that occur on the playground, or even while skateboarding, can be prevented or minimized if the child is wearing a mouthguard. A mouthguard can be purchased at a sporting goods store or can be custom-made by the dentist to fit your child's mouth.

For more information, visit "www.ada.org". ■

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