Which dental treatments are right for you?

Keep your mouth healthy

Keeping your mouth healthy is the best way to prevent problems with your teeth.

This means taking care of your teeth every day and seeing your dentist regularly.

There are other steps you can take to prevent problems. Your dentist will help you decide what is best for you and your family.

Getting to know your dentist makes it easier to talk about your choices. Talk to your dentist to see if anyone in your family needs dental treatments.
Consider sealants to prevent decay or treat beginning cavities on the back teeth

Your teeth have many small grooves and cracks where bacteria like to grow. The bacteria make acids that eat away at your teeth. This tooth decay can make a hole (cavity) in your tooth.

Dental sealants cover the grooves of your teeth so bacteria can’t hurt them. They also make your teeth smooth, so it’s easier to brush. In some cases, sealants can fix cavities when they are very small. Or they may let you delay getting a filling.

As your children grow new back teeth, or if you or someone in your family has tooth decay or gets decay often, ask your dentist about sealants. Getting sealants is quick and painless.

Don’t replace fillings just because they’re old

When you have a cavity, the dentist removes it and puts in a filling. Fillings can last for many years.

Fillings must be replaced if they break or fall out, if your tooth cracks, or if you get more decay under them.

Some people get silver fillings replaced because they don’t like the color. The process of replacing a filling can weaken your tooth. Also, your insurance may not cover the work (see “Advice from Consumer Reports”).

For jaw pain, try conservative treatments first

Temporomandibular disorder (TMD) is a common jaw problem. It can be caused by stress, arthritis, or an injury.

TMD may cause:
- Cracking and popping sounds when you open your mouth
- Pain in your face or jaw
- Trouble opening your jaw

TMD often goes away on its own. If it lasts, talk to your dentist about trying these tips:
- Find ways to ease stress, such as deep breathing.
- Sleep with a night guard. This keeps you from grinding your teeth.
- Ask your doctor about medicine to relax your muscles.
- Don’t bite your nails.

If none of these tips work, you may need braces or other dental work.
Ask about all the options for calming your child during dental procedures

Dental work can be scary for some kids. Talk with your dentist about ways to help your child stay calm.

If the treatment can wait, your dentist may suggest doing it when your child is older. See your dentist regularly to decide when and if your child needs treatment.

If your child needs care right away, the dentist may suggest using medicine (such as laughing gas) to help your child relax or sleep. Medicine is safe in most cases. But it does have some risks. Talk to your dentist about these risks. And make sure your dentist is approved to use medicine to calm your child.

Use toothpaste with fluoride for children and infants

Fluoride helps kids grow strong teeth. It also prevents cavities.

As soon as your child has teeth, start brushing with a fluoride toothpaste. Make sure to use the right amount of toothpaste:

- For kids under 3 years old, use an amount the size of a grain of rice.
- For kids ages 3 to 6, use an amount the size of a pea.

Teach your kids not to swallow toothpaste. Instead, they should spit it into the sink and rinse with water.

Four habits for a healthy smile

To keep your mouth healthy, follow these four habits. They come from the American Dental Association.

1. Brush your teeth at least two times a day with a fluoride toothpaste.
2. Clean between your teeth at least one time a day.
3. Eat a balanced diet and limit snacks and sugary drinks.
4. Visit your dentist regularly.
How to pay for dental care

Preventive care is the key to keeping your dental costs low. If you see your dentist at least twice a year for dental checkups and cleanings, your dental expenses will likely be more reasonable.

Get a dental benefit plan

If you can afford it, it’s a good idea to get a dental benefit plan. Here are some ways to get coverage.

Join a plan through your job. Find out if your employer or union has a dental plan.

Join a dental health maintenance organization (HMO). Many larger towns and cities have these. If you join a dental HMO, you pay a fee each year. This covers certain services. You will need to pay extra for other dental care. Check to see if your dentist participates in the plan.

Get coverage through the Affordable Care Act (ACA). If you have a full health plan through the ACA, you can get dental coverage. Some ACA plans cover dental care. Others let you add dental coverage for a fee.

Before you choose a dental benefit plan, find out:

• How much you need to pay each month
• How much you need to pay for exams, X-rays, and cleanings
• What services the plan covers
• Which dentists are in the plan’s network

Join a discount dental plan

A dental savings plan is like a club. You pay a fee each year. In return, you have access to a large group of dentists who provide care at a lower price.

Create a dental fund

Put aside a little money each month to make sure you can visit your dentist regularly.