

Tackling tooth decay

Tooth decay, usually referred to as “cavities,” starts in the enamel, the outer protective layer of the tooth. In some people, especially older adults, the gums pull away from the tooth and expose the tooth root. Decay can occur here as well. The good news is that because of recent scientific advancements, tooth decay sometimes can be stopped.

HOW DOES TOOTH DECAY DEVELOP?

Your teeth are covered with a sticky film of bacteria called plaque. When you eat and drink, the bacteria in plaque produce acids that can cause the enamel or root surface to break down. Plaque collects around the gumline and on the chewing surfaces of your molars in the back of your mouth, putting these areas at higher risk of developing decay.

You might not notice any signs or symptoms of early decay, but more advanced tooth decay can have several symptoms:

- food trapped frequently between teeth;
- discomfort or pain in or around your mouth;
- difficulty biting down on certain foods;
- sensitivity to hot, cold or even sweet foods;
- bad breath;
- white, then later dark, spots on your teeth.

TREATMENT

Advanced tooth decay can be painful and can result in the loss of your tooth. Without treatment, bacteria can travel through the tooth and develop into an abscess—a severe infection—under the gums. This infection can spread to other parts of the body with serious, and in rare cases fatal, consequences.

Advances in science have made it possible for your dentist to teach you how to prevent and even repair tooth decay in the early stages. Called remineralization, this approach includes use of rinses, pastes, coatings or filling materials that contain fluoride, calcium or phosphates.

These substances are the building blocks of the tooth’s hard enamel, and exposure to them can help the tooth repair itself. Like any treatment, remineralization is not always successful. Patients who have the most success follow their dentist’s recommendations closely regarding changes in home care.

For more advanced disease, your dentist may need to remove the decay and restore the tooth. If the affected area is small, he or she can place a filling in the tooth. When decay damages the tooth’s structure more extensively, your dentist may need to place a crown over the remaining tooth. In other severe cases, not enough healthy tooth is left, and the tooth must be removed.

PREVENTING TOOTH DECAY

Good dental hygiene is the first step in preventing tooth decay. Brush your teeth twice a day with a fluoride-containing toothpaste and clean between your teeth once a day with floss or an interdental cleaner. Whenever possible, drink water that contains fluoride as a way to strengthen your enamel. Limit snacking and sipping on drinks high in sugar or acids. Consider having your dentist place sealants, a protective coating, on the chewing surfaces of the back teeth. These will cover the pits and grooves there and help eliminate places for bacteria to collect.

More and more products are becoming available to help treat and prevent tooth decay. Why wait for a cavity to develop? Visit your dentist regularly for professional cleanings and a thorough examination, as well as to stay on top of these new techniques to improve your oral health. ■

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