

Avoiding Tooth Decay and Cavities

Tooth decay - also called cavities or dental caries - can happen to anyone but it is a particularly common problem for children and young adults. Left untreated, dental cavities can become infected and eventually, tooth decay can result in tooth loss.

Understanding Tooth Decay

Tooth decay begins with the normal bacteria in your mouth. These bacteria feed on food particles in your mouth and produce acid as a byproduct. The combination of bacteria, food debris, acid, and saliva in your mouth forms a filmy substance on your teeth, called plaque, roughly 20 minutes after you eat. If the plaque isn't removed promptly, tooth decay will begin. Eventually, plaque hardens into a mineral-like substance called tartar which is much harder to remove. Both tartar and plaque can eventually lead to the gum diseases gingivitis and periodontitis.

In addition to gum disease, plaque build-up also affects the protective enamel surface on your teeth, leading to cavities. Initially, cavities are painless. However, without treatment, cavities can become larger and eventually compromise the sensitive nerves and delicate blood vessels within the tooth. If an abscess or other infection develops in the tooth it can result in the destruction, and ultimately the loss of, your tooth.

The Culprits in Tooth Decay

Starches and sugars — also known as carbohydrates — are the kinds of foods most likely to cause tooth decay and cavities. Sticky foods also promote cavities because they adhere to the surface of your teeth and encourage bacterial activity. Additionally, if you snack a lot, you have a higher risk of developing cavities because plaque is formed more frequently.

Although cavities are more common in younger people, adults aren't immune. With age, gum disease occurs more frequently than tooth decay. Gum damage exposes the roots of the teeth to excess plaque, making them more vulnerable to cavities. Also, older fillings often deteriorate and allow bacteria to accumulate, resulting in more tooth

decay.

When Cavities Need To Be Filled

Most cavities are found when they are small, during regular dental checkups . Sometimes your dentist can spot cavities using X-rays even before they're visible to the naked eye. Increased sensitivity when eating sweet, hot, or cold foods and drinks can also alert you to a possible cavity. If you notice tooth sensitivity or pain, it's time to visit your dentist for an exam to find out if tooth decay is the culprit.

Once a cavity is located, your treatment options include getting a filling or crown or undergoing a root canal procedure, depending on the severity of your tooth decay. The most common cavity treatment is a filling, which is put in place by removing decayed tissue from your tooth and then filling the tooth with a composite resin, silver alloy, gold, or porcelain material.

If your cavity is severe, a crown may be necessary to reinforce the damaged tooth. After the decayed portion of the tooth is removed, a crown can be placed over the remaining dental tissue.

If tooth decay has spread to the tooth root, a root canal procedure may be required. In this procedure, the nerve tissue and blood vessels are removed. The canal is then disinfected and allowed to heal. Later, a permanent filling is placed and a crown may be necessary as well.

Preventing Tooth Decay

The best way to prevent tooth decay and the dental problems associated with tooth decay is to practice good oral hygiene. Brush and floss your teeth regularly and see your dentist twice a year for a dental cleaning and checkup. If you experience tooth sensitivity, make an appointment to see your dentist and get checked. The sooner a dental health problem like tooth decay is detected, the easier it is to treat.