



THE DENTAL EXAM

THE FOUNDATION OF GOOD ORAL HEALTH

BY DONNA PARIS

Your teeth look fine, you have no complaints and you're feeling no pain. Is it really necessary to book an appointment for a dental exam? The answer is yes, absolutely, as prevention and early detection form the foundation of good dental health.

"Gum disease and dental caries (tooth decay) may go undetected, until you notice sensitivity and it really starts to hurt," says Dr. Bruce Ward, spokesperson for the British Columbia Dental Association's (BCDA) public education program. Regular dental exams can detect problems much earlier so you can avoid symptoms and complex treatment.

"...unlike other illnesses or diseases, dental disease is not reversible, so catching it early is critical to prevent ongoing problems or negative health impacts."

Regular brushing, flossing, good nutrition, not smoking and healthy behaviours are all important in reducing the risk of cavities and gum disease. But a dental exam can identify and diagnose problems early, before they become more serious and even irreversible. "Active gum disease is not noticeable," says Dr. Ward, "And unlike other illnesses or diseases, dental disease is not reversible, so catching it early is critical to prevent ongoing problems or negative health impacts."

It's not just about gum disease. In fact, many cases of oral cancer can be diagnosed by a dentist, and experts estimate that many more could be detected by a dentist. "Oral cancer can be detected before the patient has any symptoms," says Dr. Ward. "During an exam, it can be picked up when a dentist looks at your tongue and the soft palate. Doctors don't look in your mouth and patients don't generally check under their tongues." Dentists are trained to look for everything from abnormalities in the gums and soft tissues to bite malocclusions and the depth of gum pockets that can indicate periodontal disease, adds Dr. Ward.

A dental exam is recommended at least once a year, but more frequently for people with gum problems. But if it's so important, why don't people go regularly? "I think people just forget. Life goes on and suddenly you realize that it's been 18 months since you've seen a dentist," says Dr. Ward. "And people might feel that if there is nothing wrong, they would prefer

not to take time out of their day to do something that costs them money."

But this is short-term thinking. Take the example of someone who has a bridge in their mouth, says Dr. Ward. "It may be supported by three teeth. If one side is loose, it can result in a break or dental decay, which can then progress to the point where the patient needs a root canal."

"I had someone come in to the office and say, 'I have so many broken teeth I am embarrassed to show anyone.' Well that is the time you should be going to a dentist," says Dr. Ward. "Often people find out that it's not as bad as they think it is."

It is also important to understand that dental insurance coverage is based on the plan purchased by your employer for all employees, which may or may not cover your unique oral health care needs. But even if you don't have coverage, it's important to go, says Dr. Ward. "It's something that people need to keep on their health priority list," he adds. "What is the alternative? If you have dental caries, you may lose the tooth or need a more expensive procedure in the long run." If affordability is a concern, he suggests talking to your dentist about a payment plan. There is also a list of community-based dental clinics on the yourdentalhealth.ca website.

Each patient is different of course, so the specific components of the dental examination will vary based on your current oral and general health, lifestyle factors and frequency of professional dental cleanings. And it's important to be honest with your dentist, informing them of any medications and the use of drugs and tobacco products, or mentioning anything unusual, such as any soreness or loose teeth.

"A patient is responsible for asking questions if they have any," says Dr. Ward. "The days of one-way communication from dentist to patient are over." The examination should be a dialogue, and if a patient doesn't understand something, they need to get those questions answered before they leave the office, he adds.

In the future, a dental examination may become even more important. "We have talked a lot about having dentists get more involved with general health," says Dr. Charles Shuler, Dean of the Faculty of Dentistry at UBC. As he points out, most people see their dentist when they feel well, as opposed to going to a physician when they are sick. "We can intervene when no symptoms exist," he says. "We can use saliva as a diagnostic tool to screen for high cholesterol, for instance." ♦

WHAT IS YOUR DENTIST LOOKING FOR?

Your dentist may look at some or all of the following areas depending on your needs. Parts of the exam may be completed in partnership with other members of the dental team. Your dentist gathers all of the information to make a diagnosis and recommendation to meet your oral health needs.

Medical history: Your dentist will discuss any changes to your health including health conditions or medications that could impact dental care or treatment.

X-rays/radiographs: Your dentist may recommend X-rays, a valuable diagnostic tool to see what's going on below the surface of your teeth and gums.

Status of oral hygiene: Your dentist will assess plaque and tartar levels as these can affect the health of your teeth and gums.

Gums: Your dentist will look for signs of disease such as redness, swelling or infection.

Soft tissues: Your dentist will monitor the health of the soft tissues of your mouth including the lips, tongue, cheeks and upper and lower surfaces of the mouth for signs of oral cancer or sensitivity.

Teeth: Your dentist will check the condition of your teeth to identify any damaged or decayed teeth along with the condition of any dental prosthesis like dentures, for example.

Existing dental work: Your dentist will inspect any existing dental work such as fillings, root canals and crowns to make sure they are in good shape.

Jaw function: Your dentist will evaluate how the teeth are fitting together and your bite, as well as the overall health and function of the temporomandibular joint (the joint that joins the jaw to the skull).

Facial structure: Your dentist will look at the general condition of the bones in the face, jaw and around the mouth.

Baby teeth: Often overlooked by adults, baby teeth are very important and should be examined regularly. Your child's dentist will monitor the growth and development of baby and permanent teeth. Children can have their baby teeth until they're 12-13 years old.