



Routine Dental Care

Good oral health relies on healthy routines. By establishing these healthy routines, you can lower your risk for dental problems.



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Oral health matters

Many oral conditions can affect your mouth and jaws, but the most commonly treated fall into a small number of categories. Tooth decay and gum disease are among the most common chronic diseases in the United States, and oral cancer is more deadly than many other types of cancer because it often goes undetected. A recent report from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services states that four of the 30 most prevalent global diseases are related to oral health. They are untreated tooth decay in baby teeth or adult teeth, severe periodontal disease (periodontitis), and multiple or complete tooth loss (edentulism). Simply put, it is every bit as important to take care of your mouth as it is any other part of your body.

- **Tooth decay:** Tooth decay affects 9 of 10 working-age adults. While tooth decay is most common in children, the numbers don't vary much by age group. There are significant differences based on gender, income, racial or national origin, and lifestyle choices.
- **Gum disease:** The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) has reported that nearly half of adults 30 or older have some form of periodontal disease. That number exceeds 70% of adults over the age of 65.
- **Oral cancer:** Oral cancer is diagnosed in over 50,000 Americans a year. While treatment methods are improving, the 5-year survival rate is only about 60%, far worse than many other forms of cancer.

Untreated tooth decay and periodontal disease will eventually result in discomfort, pain, avoidable treatment, high costs, and missing teeth. All of these can dramatically affect your appearance, ability to chew, digestion, nutrition, and self-esteem.

Your mouth contains many types of bacteria. Some are good; some are harmful. Preventing these harmful bacteria from breeding in your mouth and entering your bloodstream is essential to your oral and overall health. When bacterial infection enters your bloodstream in significant amounts, it can increase your risk or decrease your ability to manage many common chronic health conditions, including cardiovascular disease, kidney disease, diabetes, dementia and Alzheimer's disease, and respiratory diseases. Higher levels of harmful bacteria have also been correlated to preterm and low birth-weight pregnancies. At their worst, untreated oral diseases such as oral cancer can result in death.

Medical review: Thomas J. Greany DDS. © go2dental. All rights reserved.

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The nature of dental disease

Tooth decay can be slowed in some cases, and early gum disease (gingivitis) is reversible. Periodontal disease can be treated, and the damage it causes can generally be repaired, but it must then be managed through good oral hygiene and regular periodontal maintenance. This is essential to keep the disease from progressing, causing additional damage, and impacting your overall health.

The procedures most often required to address tooth decay and gum disease are fillings, crowns, periodontal treatment, and oral surgery. These procedures will eventually fail or need to be repeated. Even well-made dental restorations like fillings and crowns have a finite lifespan. When they fail, they will typically need to be replaced with a larger restoration. When a larger restoration fails, a root canal or tooth removal (tooth extraction) may be necessary.

The focus is on prevention

The best way to treat tooth decay and gum disease is to prevent them from happening in the first place. This is achieved with good oral hygiene and regular dental visits.

- **Good oral hygiene at home:** You own the choice to keep your mouth healthy. Regular dental visits are not enough. Even if you do visit the dentist regularly, say twice a year, the real question is this: What are you doing on the other 363 days a year?
- **Regular dental visits:** Many systemic diseases exhibit oral symptoms. Your dentist plays a vital role in the early detection of possible symptoms of diseases such as diabetes, cancer, and heart disease. In addition, dentists are one of only a handful of healthcare providers that routinely screen patients for oral cancer and are in a unique position to identify possible signs of hidden conditions such as eating disorders. During a dental exam, your dentist may recognize these symptoms and refer you to a healthcare professional for evaluation. This can lead to earlier treatment and improve your chances for a successful recovery. It is important to note that dentists can screen for evidence of systemic disease but cannot make formal diagnoses for these conditions.

The commitment to your family's oral health is on you

Make oral health a priority. Face and overcome your fears of the dentist. Take accountability, and teach your kids to do the same from a young age. Learning about the effects of poor oral health care through failure is not a good option when it comes to your mouth.

- **Take care of yourself and your family:** There are many simple things everyone must do routinely and properly to maintain good oral hygiene, but different ages present different challenges. For infants and toddlers, you have the responsibility to take care of their oral health right from the start. As they mature, children, pre-teens, and teenagers must learn to take responsibility for themselves, but you should have the tools to help them every step of the way. If you also have responsibilities for caring for aging parents, there are unique challenges they may face that you need to understand to help them maintain their oral health.
- **Prepare for treatment:** Find a dentist you trust, and take the time to prepare for visits. Learn about what's involved with any given treatment. Learn about risks and alternatives, and take the time to prepare questions to ask your dentist. This resource is here to guide you through this process.
- **Understand your risk factors:** There is no standard of care that meets everyone's needs. Your personal risk factors and lifestyle choices determine the proper hygiene requirements, frequency of care, and treatment needs for you.
- **Terminology:** Become familiar with the terms you may hear at the dentist.
- **Medications:** Learn how the medications you take can impact your oral health.
- **Emergencies:** Prepare yourself to handle dental emergencies.