

From the Health Clinic

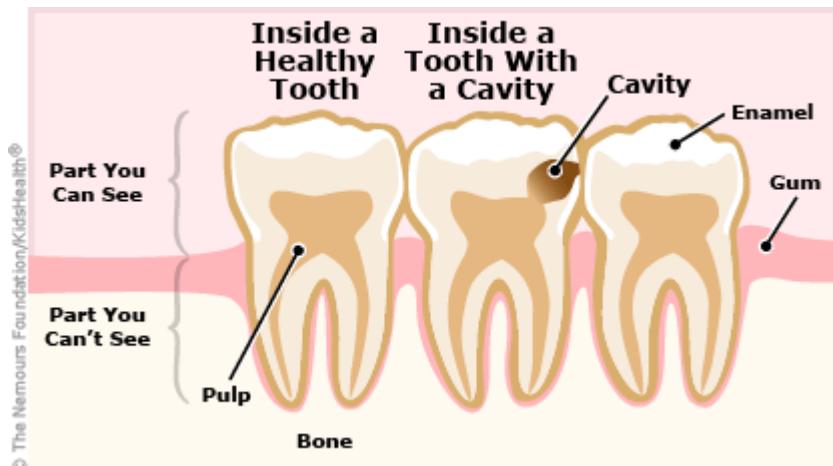


Keeping Your Child's Teeth Healthy



How Can We Prevent Cavities?

Cavities happen when bacteria and food left on the teeth after eating are not brushed away. Acid collects on a tooth, softening its enamel until a hole - or cavity - forms.



Here is how to keep cavities away:

- **Start good oral habits early.** Teach children to brush at least twice a day with fluoride toothpaste and to floss regularly.
- **Get enough fluoride.** Regular use of fluoride toughens the enamel, making it harder for acid to penetrate. Although many towns require tap water to be fluoridated, others do not. If your water supply is not fluoridated or if your family uses purified water, ask your dentist for fluoride supplements. Most toothpaste contains fluoride but toothpaste alone will not fully protect a child's teeth. Be careful, however, since too much fluoride can cause tooth discoloration. Check with your dentist before supplementing.
- **Limit or avoid certain foods.** Sugary foods, juices, candy (especially sticky gummy candy, gummy vitamins, or fruit leather or "roll-ups") can erode enamel and cause cavities. If your children eat these foods, have them rinse their mouth or brush their teeth after eating to wash away the sugar. The same goes for taking sweetened liquid medicines: always have children rinse or brush afterward.

As your child's permanent teeth grow in, the dentist can help prevent decay by applying a thin wash of resin (called a sealant) to the back teeth, where most chewing is done. This protective coating keeps bacteria from settling in the hard-to-reach crevices of the molars. But make sure that children know that sealants are not a replacement for good brushing and regular flossing.

What Dental Problems Can Happen?

If you are prone to tooth decay or gum disease, your children might be at higher risk as well. Sometimes even the best brushing and flossing habits cannot prevent a cavity. Be sure to call your dentist if your child complains of tooth pain, which could be a sign of a cavity that needs treatment.

New materials mean pediatric dentists have more filling and repair options than ever. A silver-colored material called amalgam (a special mix of metals) was once the substance of choice for most fillings in permanent teeth. But now, other materials like composite resins are becoming popular. Resins bond to the teeth so the filling won't pop out, and also can be used to rebuild teeth damaged through injury or conditions like a cleft palate. Because resins are often tooth-colored, they're considered more attractive.

But in cases of fracture, extensive decay, or malformation of baby teeth, dentists often opt for stainless steel or ceramic crowns. Crowns maintain the tooth while preventing the decay from spreading.

In some rare instances, usually when a more complicated dental procedure is to be done, a dentist will recommend using general anesthesia. Parents should make sure that the professional who gives the medicine is a trained anesthesiologist or oral surgeon before agreeing to the procedure. Do not be afraid ask your dentist questions.

Regular checkups and good dental hygiene can help prevent the need for this kind of extensive dental work. Also, encourage your children to use a mouth guard during sports, which can prevent serious dental injuries.

What Is Orthodontia?

As children get older, their bite and the straightness of their teeth can become an issue. Orthodontic treatment begins earlier now than it used to, and braces have changed too. The embarrassing old gear - a mouth filled with metal wires and braces - is in the past. Children as young as age 7 now wear corrective appliances, and plastic-based (sometimes clear) materials have replaced metal.

Orthodontists know that manipulation of teeth at a younger age can be easier and more effective in the long run. Younger children's teeth can be positioned with fairly minor orthodontic devices, preventing major treatment later on.

Looking Ahead

As children grow, plan on routine dental checkups anywhere from once every 3 months to once a year, depending on your dentist's recommendations. Keeping sugary foods in check, encouraging regular brushing and flossing, and working with your dentist will lead good dental health.



