

The Dental Exam

Regular dental exams or checkups are the best way to make sure your gums and teeth stay healthy. Dental exams should be done every 6 months to allow your dentist to diagnose any problems which may be developing in the early stages and allow preventive action to be taken before the problems become more severe. Dental exams are especially important for people with extensive dental restorations, dentures, dental implants, or those who are taking medication which cause dry mouth or overgrown gums. Even people who are diligent about brushing and flossing still need regular care from a dental professional because no matter how carefully you take care of your teeth and gums, or how carefully you look for signs of problems, there are a number of oral health conditions that only your dentist can see.

Prior to the exam, it is important to review your medical history with your dentist. Medications are routinely prescribed by physicians to treat medical diseases such as high blood pressure, heart disease, osteoporosis and many other conditions requiring medications for control. These medications are required to treat the causes of these diseases but all medications, whether taken by mouth or injected, come with a risk of side effects. Hundreds of drugs are known to cause problems in the mouth and can affect your teeth. It is important to discuss your medications with your dentist so that he can make you aware of common oral side effects related to those medications and alter treatment planning to account for medications you are taking.

During the exam your dentist will look for anything unusual in your mouth, throat and neck, including the oral manifestations of diseases, oral cancer, infections, eroded fillings and dental decay. Attention to existing dental work will be given to look for deterioration in fillings, crowns and other restorations. The exam will include a periodontal exam to look for signs of gum disease.

During a periodontal exam, your gums are checked for bleeding, swelling and firmness. X-rays can help detect breakdown of bone surrounding your teeth. Periodontal probing determines how severe your disease is. A probe is like a tiny ruler that is gently inserted into pockets around teeth. The deeper the pocket, the more severe the disease is. The goal of periodontal treatment is to control any infection and to halt progression of disease.

Dental radiographs or x-rays are an important part of a complete dental examination. They are among the most valuable tools a dentist has for keeping your mouth and teeth healthy. They do not however replace the need of a visual and tactile examination. The combination of x-rays, a visual exam and patient descriptions of symptoms allows the dentist to diagnose dental disease and determine the treatment required for our patients. If patients decline to have x-rays taken then the exam is incomplete and problems can arise which could have been prevented earlier.

Dental x-rays give dentist a tremendous amount of information regarding their patient's teeth. X-rays show areas of decay that may not be able to be seen with just a visual examination, such as tiny pits of decay that occur between teeth. They also help diagnose decay that is developing underneath a filling, alert the dentist about bone loss associated with periodontal (gum disease), and reveal problems in the root canal, such as infection. They also help your dentist plan and prepare for crowns, bridges and dental implants and can also reveal abnormalities such as cysts, cancer, and metabolic diseases.

Timely treatment can reduce the need for more expensive and time consuming treatments and in the case of oral cancer it can save your life. Regular checkups and cleanings every 6 months with your dentist can help to keep your teeth healthy and trouble free.

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