

If It Ain't Broke, Better Fix It Before It Hurts...

In most people's teeth, cavities grow slow. On top of that, our teeth were built so that tooth decay and gum disease rarely cause pain until the later stages of progression. I like to think that this has something to do with our ancestors and their lack of access to dental care. Og and Grog could not abandon their chasing of the herd for regular dental check-ups and cleanings. Luckily, their diet had no refined sugars or carbohydrates, thus decay was rare. We are not so lucky.

Toothaches are an obvious place to start. When someone walks into our office with a broken or painful tooth, they know they need treatment. After diagnosing the problem, we can discuss their options, along with the pros and cons of each treatment available. Educated patients can then make informed decisions about their own teeth. This is how our system should work.

On the other hand, things can get confusing for people when they walk into a dental office with no pain and no concerns with their teeth. It is quite common for many of us to walk around with cavities, gum disease, defective crowns, and even corroded silver fillings; all while experiencing no pain at all. Tooth problems can be just as "silent" as heart disease, high blood pressure, and diabetes. Just because it doesn't hurt right now, does not mean that it will not become a painful problem in the future.

Fortunately, there are quite a few technologies that can help to explain oral health problems and their risks. We can take digital pictures that show defective fillings, cracked teeth, and unhealthy gums. While most people do not know how to read an x-ray of their own teeth, computerized, digital x-rays can be displayed on monitors to illustrate cavities, dental infections, and calculus in between the teeth. A picture is truly worth a thousand words. We've even had a person ask to fix some teeth that were not broken, just because they looked so "ugly and cracked," in her pictures. On the flip side, we once had a patient swear his teeth could not be as broken down as his picture showed and that, "those can't be my teeth." We let him take a second picture himself to confirm.

The moral of this story is that infected teeth, like most other diseases, can grow silently. By the time a tooth hurts, more extensive damage is done that leads to more extensive treatment, more pain, more infection, and more expense. Prevention is the key to healthy teeth and no pain.

Until next time, keep smiling.

-Please send comments to Drs. Parrish at www.ParrishDental.com.