DENTAL PREVENTION

Dental prevention is not simply avoiding the dentist, although for some there seems to be some truth to this statement. No, dental prevention actually consists of several factors which when incorporated into your daily life will, help you to prevent having any significant dental problems. These factors include proper brushing and flossing, regular dental visits, sealants, fluoride supplements, proper diet, and trauma prevention.

Before looking any further at the factors involved in dental prevention, let's take a quick look at the average tooth. Since a significant portion of dental prevention is aimed at preventing cavities, it's important to know what a tooth is made up of and how a cavity forms. All teeth are basically made up of three parts: enamel, dentin, and the neurovasculature. Enamel is the most outside portion of the tooth. It's the part that you can see everyday. Enamel is hard and consists of many closely packed rods made of mineral. When you eat, acid forms on the outside of the tooth and seeps into the enamel rods. This demineralization process can produce a weak spot in the tooth's surface and, if unchecked, the enamel can decay and create a cavity. A cavity can further extend into the dentin, which is the hard layer of mineral beneath the enamel, or it can actually make it all the way to the nerve and blood vessels in the very center of the tooth-that's where the infamous root canal comes into play.

Several factors can be employed to help prevent cavities. First and foremost, proper brushing with a fluoridated toothpaste AND flossing is a must. The easiest way to prevent cavities is to brush and floss on a daily basis. This will probably take a whole 5 minutes out of your day, but can save you endless hours in the dental chair. Next it is very important to have regular dental checkups. During a regular checkup, your dentist will check for cavities, check your gums, examine your mouth and throat for indications of possible cancer, check for irregularities in facial structure, check your bite, and evaluate your temporomandibular joint (TMJ). The dentist or hygienist will also clean your teeth and provide instructions on how to *properly* brush and floss your teeth.

Sometimes your dentist may feel you need a fluoride supplement. These supplements come in various shapes and sizes. In communities that do not have a fluoridated water supply, such as ours, fluoride drops or tablets are routinely prescribed for children. Also, in those individuals with a systemic disease, such as diabetes, or in someone with a high caries (cavities) rate a fluoride gel may be prescribed to brush with or to use in custom-made trays. There are also over-the-counter fluoride rinses that can be used on a daily basis. However, make sure they are a *fluoride* rinse and not just a tasty mouth rinse. The last factor used to help prevent cavities is sealants. Sealants are primarily used in children around the age of 7, but can be used in any age patient when indicated. Sealants are basically a very thin plastic coating applied to the chewing surface of molars or sometimes premolars. They help that surface of the tooth to become

smooth so that it is difficult for food to become *stuck* to the tooth. This will in turn help the tooth not to get a cavity.

The last area of dental prevention is trauma prevention. Now there is absolutely no way to prevent trauma to the face or mouth. Whether you try to eat a softball or someone elbows your mouth during a heated basketball game, accidents do happen. However, if you are participating in a potential contact activity, it is very important to wear a mouth guard. You don't have to have a $200 custom-made mouth guard to protect your teeth from injury. There are several over-the-counter mouth guards available that will stabilize your teeth and jaws and help prevent any serious injuries.

Lastly, if you have any questions regarding your dental health, please contact your dentist. They will be happy to answer any questions you have.