

Episode 1: The Big Picture

OK. Shut your eyes and imagine this (don't really shut them, just pretend to shut them). In ten years time, when you go to sleep at night, would you prefer real teeth in your head, or plastic ones you get to keep in a glass of water next to your bed? Most people say "I want the real ones" just to avoid me badgering them. Let's assume, however, you really do want to keep your teeth. "What should I be doing Jim?", you ask. "Excellent question", I answer. An overview of the important rules to follow is below. Some of these ideas are expanded upon elsewhere, but this is a quick introduction for the attention-span challenged.

1. Diet:

If you have three meals a day and nothing that contains sugar in between, it is almost impossible to get decay. The more stuff with sugar you have between meals (fruit, juice, chocolates, lollies, sugared coffee, soft drinks, assorted other stuff etc.) the more holes you are likely to get.

2. Cleaning:

To prevent gum disease you gotta brush and floss. Once a day is enough. It makes your breath nice and your gums strong.

3. Strong Fillings:

If you have old fillings or your teeth are starting to crack, it is important to have them strengthened before problems occur. If you wait until things begin to hurt, treatment can become much more complicated. (Complicated is a nice way of saying expensive).

4. Regular Visits:

Even when everything is fixed as well as possible, you still have to drag yourself in for a regular pep talk and look see. This is mostly because we like seeing you, but also to pick up little things before they become big things. So that's it in a nutshell. There is more detailed

information available below on these and other issues. If your brain isn't hurting too much keep reading, it may save you a lot of physical and financial grief .

Episode 2: Diet (how to ward off the evil decay spirits)

Would you like to never get another cavity? It is possible. In fact, if you follow just a few rules, you are almost guaranteed never to get another cavity. Here's how it works. Everybody has bugs ("bacteria" or "germs") in their mouth that form into the thin film known as plaque. Decay happens when certain of these bugs turn sugar into acid. This acid causes demineralization of enamel and dentine resulting in decay. Now the good guys are your saliva and fluoride. The saliva neutralises the acid produced by the bugs and starts the process of remineralization. Fluoride accelerates this repair process (stick around, this will get more interesting). However, it takes 30 mins after having anything with sugar, for your teeth to stop demineralizing if you don't brush your teeth.

So, your teeth are dissolving for half an hour after you have anything with sugar. If you have three meals a day and nothing in between, your teeth dissolve for 1.5 hours a day. They seem to cope OK with this. Every snack between meals (and that includes fruit) adds an extra half hour to your dissolving time. If you've got enough fingers count up how many meals or snacks or drinks with sugar you have a day. Multiply by .5 (use toes as necessary) and you get how much of the day your teeth spend rotting. If it's 8 hours or more, start putting a glass of water next to your bed, to get used to where your teeth will spend time in the future.

Before all you chocoholics reach for the razor blades there is a simple solution. All you have to do is bundle up all your snacks and include them with the three major meals. Hey Presto! No more decay. If you must gorge yourself between meals some things are OK. Most dairy products and vegetables are fine to have as snacks. You can drink water, milk, coffee/tea (with artificial sweeteners) and diet cordials. Diet soft drinks are sort of OK but don't overdo it. It sounds easy and it is. The rest is up to you.

Episode 3: Diet Dangers, Do's 'n Don'ts

Remember, it pretty much doesn't matter what you have with breakfast lunch and dinner from a tooth point of view. It's the snacking between meals that does all the damage. Of course from a health point of view it is very important, but we're just talking teeth here. Lets look at common in between meal snacks and rate them:

1. Really Bad Foods

Soft drinks- Coke is the main evil here but they're all bad.

Cordials- Normal ones with sugar.

Sports Drinks-Save them for the big race, no other time.

Fruit Juice- Juice is lolly water. High in (natural) sugar and acidic as well!

Lollies- Pretty obvious.

Cough Lollies- Not so obvious.

Dried Fruit- All the sugar is concentrated.

Sugared Coffee and Tea.

2. Fairly Bad Foods

Fruit- Sorry, fruit is a poor in between meal snack. That includes apples (Sugar and acid again!)

Muesli Bars- These things are a real joke. They're really sugar bars.

Biscuits- The better they taste, the worse they are.

3. Good Foods (Things you can have between meals)

Water - water is now cool .

Milk - plain, not flavoured. Milk also is now cool, ain't life funny?

Cheese. Cheese is the best snack.

Yogurt - the plain stuff, not the ones with fruit.

Vegetables - all vegies are great snacks.

So, the future is in your hands (actually it's probably in the fridge but you know what I mean).

Episode 4: What d'ya mean, I got Gum Disease?

Ever notice a bit of blood on your toothbrush? The last time you flossed (probably when Moses was a boy) did your gums bleed so you decided you were doing it wrong? Do you ever go three days without flossing? If the answer is yes to any, or all, of the above, then you have ... (insert menacing music) ... gum disease.

Now, if you're like most people you're probably in denial. You think everyone's gums bleed and it's no big deal. And for some people it never will be a big deal. The problem is, by the time you notice there's anything wrong it's too late to fix it easily. Imagine if any other part of

your body bled every time you touched it. Obviously, something's wrong.

So what is Gum Disease?

I'm glad you asked. That film that accumulates on your teeth if you don't brush for a while is called plaque. It contains the bugs (bacteria) that cause tooth decay and gum disease. If the bugs get left close to the gum for 2-3 days then the toxins that they produce seep into the gums and cause infection. That's when they start to bleed. You've now got Gingivitis. But it gets worse.

Say the plaque gets left there for an extended period of time. After a while it gets hard and forms ledges (calculus or tartar). Now more plaque will accumulate and as hard as you try, you'll never get rid of it all. Now the infection is really starting to take hold. But it gets worse.

Your teeth penetrate all the way through the skin down to the bone. Nowhere else in the body does this happen. Your gums are the "gasket" that keeps the bugs out of the bone. In some people (about 25%) the infection will move through the gums into the bone surrounding the teeth. You've now got Periodontal Disease. When this happens the bone around the tooth is slowly dissolved by the infection until there is little bone holding the tooth in. (This can take 20 years.) The tooth gets loose, and has to be pulled out. Sounds great doesn't it?

So, I've got Gum Disease. It's not like it can kill me. We used to think that. However research published in the last year has revealed a positive link between gum disease and artery disease. That means if you have gum disease you are at greater risk of having a heart attack or stroke.

OK, you've scared me. What can I do?

A few simple steps will, in most cases, stop things getting worse:

1. The hard deposits (calculus) need to be removed from your teeth. This has to be done by your hygienist, dentist or gum specialist (periodontist). You can't eliminate the infection until all of these deposits are removed. It may only take one visit to do or it may take 4 visits or longer, depending on how bad (or how deep) it is to start with.

2. You need to brush your teeth really well (we're talking 3-4 minutes) at least once a day. When you do this be sure to push the bristles (of a SOFT toothbrush) into the gums to try to make them bleed. The areas you HAVE NOT been brushing properly in the past will bleed. Don't

worry about this. After a 5-6 days these areas will stop bleeding which will tell you they are now healthier.

3. Before you brush at night, you have to clean between your teeth using dental floss. This will also cause bleeding for the first week.

4. Keep getting them cleaned. Unfortunately there are a few areas that are almost impossible for you to get to. Every six months is generally often enough. If you have active gum disease, every three months may be recommended until things are under control. The bugs that cause gum disease don't like oxygen (they're anaerobic for the technically minded). This means that you can kill them just by stirring them up every day. The whole idea behind flossing and brushing is to keep the colonies of bacteria from establishing themselves. Good Luck

Episode 5: What Should I be Doing?

An individual assessment needs to be done to tailor a preventive program specific to your needs. Are you reading between the lines here? Maybe I need to spell it out a little more clearly: "Come in and lets us have a look!!" While you're procrastinating about when you'll make an appointment, have a go at a few of the following recommendations. It could do you a lot of good.

High Risk Patients

A short intensive course of a Chlorhexidine mouthwash (such as Colgate Savacol) has been shown to kill the bacteria that cause decay. Hold 10ml in the mouth for 4 minutes twice a day immediately after brushing. This process should be continued for 14 days and can be repeated at 6 monthly intervals. To remineralise the enamel, rinse with Colgate Neutrefluor 900 for 1 min after brushing at night.

Low/Medium Risk Patients

Use toothpaste with fluoride.

Brush your teeth twice a day.

Floss your teeth in the evening before brushing.

'Spit don't rinse'. After brushing, use your cheeks and tongue to pump the toothpaste around your mouth for 1 minute. Then take a small sip of water and spit out.

Do not rinse with water afterwards and do not eat or drink before going to bed. You're giving yourself a "Mini fluoride treatment" every night. (This was shown to reduce cavities in children by 26%.) Especially important here in Brisbane because we don't have the benefits of fluoride in the water, thanks to Jim Soorly.

Give up Smoking: Yesterday or the day before yesterday.

Treat yourself to an electric toothbrush, either a Colgate or an Oral-B with the small circular head. You will get there with a manual brush but it will take longer and you will need to be more thorough.

Interdental brushes are useful if you have gum disease and can't floss.

Things that will help

Eliminate sugar between meals (see the diet info)

Drink 6 glasses of water (minimum) per day

Reduce caffeine consumption

Chew sugarless gum (Extra)

Drag yourself in regularly for some of our scolding (sorry, encouragement).

Follow the advice above and you'll deny some poor dentist a healthy income.

It's your call!

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