

Dentistry Offers Variety of Options to Keep Teeth Healthy for a Lifetime

Preventive dental care can mean the difference between life-long good oral health or expensive, painful oral ailments. You can protect and enhance your oral health by following these tips:

Your Responsibility as a Dental Patient

The Florida Dental Association (FDA) and American Dental Association (ADA) urge you to take an active role in your oral health care. Know your health status and tell your dentist about any illnesses or health conditions you may have. In addition, your dentist will need to know if you are taking any medications (prescription or non-prescription) and whether you've ever had any allergic reactions to medications.

Understanding the range of choices available to relieve anxiety and discomfort makes you a well-informed dental patient. If you have questions or concerns about your oral health care, don't hesitate to talk to your dentist. If you still have concerns, consider getting a second opinion. Working together, you and your dentist can choose the appropriate steps to make your dental visit as safe and comfortable as possible, and to help you keep a healthy smile.

How Can I Take Good Care of My Teeth at Home?

Daily preventive maintenance is the first step toward having life-long good dental health. By practicing the following techniques, you and your family will be well on your way to maintaining healthy teeth and gums:

Toothbrushes

A soft-bristled toothbrush can help prevent damage to your teeth and gums. Look for brushes with the ADA Seal of Approval and be sure to replace it every three to four months.

To brush properly, place the brush at a 45-degree angle to the teeth and use a gentle back-and-forth motion. Remember to clean the back teeth, the tongue and inside teeth surfaces where plaque deposits are heavy.

Fluoride

Fluoride is a natural mineral that safely strengthens tooth enamel, the hard outer "shell" of the tooth. The addi-

tive stops cavities from forming and is found in many foods, community water supplies, toothpastes and mouthwashes.

Your dentist can tell you if you are getting enough, or whether a fluoride supplement in drops or tablet form should be taken. During the next dental visit, be sure to ask how much fluoride is right for you and your family.

Flossing

Flossing is very important to good oral care and should be done at least once a day. This preventive measure removes plaque and food particles from under the gum-line and between teeth. Parents should start flossing their child's teeth when the sides of two teeth touch.

Sealants

Molar crevices are difficult to clean because they are too narrow for toothbrush bristles and too deep for the normal flow of saliva to reach. Without protection, these back teeth are especially prone to cavities. However, sealants protect the teeth by sealing out decay.

A sealant is a plastic material applied to chewing surfaces and acts as a barrier that protects enamel from plaque and acids. Sealants are painted onto the tooth where it hardens to protect against decay. The plastic seals hold up very well under the normal force of chewing and usually last several years before another application is needed. Children and adults can benefit from having this protective coating applied to their teeth.

How Do I Know If My Dentist Practices Proper Infection Control?

On its Web site at www.floridadental.org, the FDA offers a safety checklist for dental patients to use to learn what steps dentists take to prevent the spread of infection. The precautions support the infection-control guidelines issued by the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and patients are encouraged to review the checklist and talk to their dentists about the measures during their dental visits.

The below safety precautions prevent the spread of any and all infectious diseases in health-care settings:

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Hand Washing and Using Gloves

Make sure the dentist and dental-team members (dental hygienist and assistant) wash their hands and put on a fresh pair of gloves before starting treatment.

Protective Clothing

Your dentist and dental team should wear protective clothing while they provide treatment. Clothing includes protective eyewear or a face shield and a clean clinic jacket or lab coat to cover street clothes.

Sterilization and Disinfection

Ask your dentist and dental-team members how dental instruments, such as the hand-mirror, are sterilized and disinfected for each patient. Most instruments should be scrubbed clean first to remove debris and then sterilized in a steam autoclave or in a heat-pressurized oven. Instruments that cannot withstand such high temperatures should be scrubbed clean, rinsed and then soaked in a disinfectant for a specific amount of time.

Office Cleanliness

Look at the general cleanliness of the office, especially surfaces such as countertops, chairs, X-ray machines and light handles.

Dental Hand Pieces

Ask your dentist how dental hand pieces are cleaned. The objects include the mechanical instruments that are used in the dental office. Many dentists now have hand pieces that can be heat sterilized, but there are other acceptable methods by which your dentist may sterilize or disinfect hand pieces. Your dentist can tell you about his or her specific methods.

Disposable Items

Many dental materials such as gloves, masks, wipes, paper drapes, suction/water tube tips, needles and scalpel blades should be used only once and then disposed of properly. Using disposable items is another way dentists maintain a clean and safe office.

Waste Materials

Ask your dentist how waste materials are disposed of and handled. Needles and other sharp items should be disposed of in special puncture-proof containers. Other contaminated waste should be disposed of in special bags.

What is Dental Anesthesia?

Several dental treatments require various types of anesthesia to ensure the patient is comfortable during the procedure. The options below are available to help alleviate anxiety or pain that may be associated with dental care:

Analgesics

Non-narcotic analgesics are the most commonly used drugs for relief of toothache or pain following dental treatment. The medicinal category includes aspirin, acetaminophen and non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs such as ibuprofen.

Narcotic analgesics, such as those containing codeine, act on the central nervous system to relieve pain. These medications are used for more severe pain.

Local Anesthesia

Topical anesthetics are applied to mouth tissues with a swab to prevent pain on the surface level. Your dentist may use a topical anesthetic to numb an area in preparation for administering an injectable local anesthetic. Topical anesthetics also may be used to soothe painful mouth sores.

Injectable local anesthetics, such as Novocain, prevent pain in a specific area of your mouth during treatment by blocking the nerves that sense or transmit pain and numb mouth tissues. The treatment causes temporary numbness and may be used in procedures such as filling cavities, preparing teeth for crowns or treating gum disease.

Sedation and General Anesthesia

Anti-anxiety agents, such as nitrous oxide or sedatives, may help you relax during dental visits and often may be used along with local anesthetics. Dentists also can use these agents to induce “conscious sedation,” in which the patient achieves a relaxed state during treatment but can respond to speech or touch. Sedatives can be administered before, during or after dental procedures by mouth, inhalation or injection.

More complex treatments may require drugs that can induce “deep sedation,” causing a loss of feeling and reducing consciousness to relieve pain and anxiety. On occasion, patients undergo “general anesthesia,” in which drugs cause a temporary loss of consciousness. Deep sedation and general anesthesia may be recommended in certain procedures for children or others who have severe anxiety or who have difficulty controlling their movements.

For more information, visit www.floridadental.org.