

DENTISTRY 101

Dentistry, like many health-care professions, can be confusing with its technical terms, disease names and treatment options. Your oral health is a very important part of your overall health and is just as important as an annual physical with your physician.

The information below answers common dental questions that will start you and your family on the path to excellent oral health:

WHY ARE REGULAR DENTAL CHECK-UPS IMPORTANT?

Visiting your dentist is a crucial part of your overall health. Dental ailments can cause everything from bad breath and tooth loss to premature birth and cancer. By visiting a Florida Dental Association (FDA) member-dentist on a regular basis, you can closely monitor your dental health and prevent or treat the following problems:

Gingivitis

Mild inflammation is the earliest stage of gum disease. Gums get red and puffy after plaque and tartar build up at the gum line. Bleeding during brushing and flossing is an obvious sign of a problem.

Gum Disease

Also called periodontal disease, gum disease is the major reason for tooth loss among adults. Bacteria in plaque create toxins that inflame or infect the gums and bone that support teeth. Recessive gums and damaged bones can cause teeth to shift, loosen or even fall out.

Periodontitis

Periodontitis is the most serious stage of gum disease. Plaque spreads to tooth roots causing infection that damages or destroys the supporting bone and gums that hold teeth in place. Teeth begin to shift or loosen. Gums pull away from teeth and form a pocket below the gum line where food and plaque are trapped.

Plaque

Teeth are covered with a sticky, colorless film of bacteria called plaque. This bacteria gets energy from sugar and starch in food, converting them into harmful acids that attack tooth enamel for 20 minutes or longer. Repeated attacks may break down enamel and cause cavities.

Abscess

An abscess is a very serious dental condition and requires immediate treatment. An abscessed tooth should not be ignored because it can lead to more serious infections that can adversely affect your overall health.

The ailment consists of a pocket of pus that forms at the tips of teeth roots as a result of a cracked tooth or a deep cavity. The infection can cause damage to the dental pulp, the tooth's soft core and nerve center. When diseased pulp is left untreated, it dies, and the bone around the tooth can be destroyed.

In most cases, the abscess can be effectively treated with root-canal therapy. This procedure safely saves a tooth by cleaning out and filling the damaged pulp. Sometimes, the tooth cannot be saved and must be removed. Tooth replacement then would be necessary.

Bad Breath

If you don't brush and floss daily, particles of food remain in the mouth, collecting bacteria, which can cause bad breath. Food that collects between the teeth, on the tongue and around the gums can rot, leaving an unpleasant odor. Dentures that are not cleaned properly also can harbor odor-causing bacteria. Other causes of bad breath include sinus infections, dry mouth, certain medical disorders, foods like onions or garlic, and tobacco products.



WHEN SHOULD MY CHILD START GOING TO THE DENTIST?

It is important to start your child's dental routine by the time they reach age 1. Pediatric dentists can suggest preventive techniques to keep your baby's teeth and gums healthy,

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while continuing to monitor the child's oral health. Your child's dentist will check for the following:

Baby Bottle Tooth Decay

As soon as a baby's first teeth appear – usually by age six months or so—a child is susceptible to decay. This condition often is referred to as Baby Bottle Tooth Decay or Early Childhood Caries (cavities). The condition develops when an infant nurses continuously from a bottle of milk, formula, sugar water or fruit juice during naps or at night. As the child sleeps, the liquids pool around the teeth, resulting in serious decay over a short period. In some unfortunate cases, infants and toddlers have experienced severe tooth decay resulting in dental restorations or extractions.

To prevent tooth decay, encourage your child to drink from a cup as they approach their first birthday. In addition, children should not fall asleep with a bottle and drinking juice from a bottle should be avoided.



Daily Dental Maintenance

Starting at birth, clean your child's gums with a soft infant toothbrush and water. Unless advised by your child's pediatric dentist, do not use fluoridated toothpaste until age 2 to 3.

Teething

From 6 months to 3 years of age, your child may have sore gums when teeth begin to come in. Many children

like a clean teething ring, cool spoon or cold wet washcloth to ease the pain.

Thumb Sucking

Some parents also worry about the affects thumb sucking may have on their child's teeth. Thumb sucking is normal for infants, but most children stop by age 2. Prolonged thumb sucking can create crowded, crooked teeth or bite problems, your pediatric dentist can suggest ways to address a prolonged thumb sucking habit if it occurs.

WHAT ARE DENTAL SPECIALTIES?

There are several types of dentists that specialize in various dental treatments, similar to medical practitioners. Dental specialties include:

Endodontics

Endodontists save teeth with root-canal therapy, which involves the soft inner tissue of the teeth. These dental professionals diagnose the cause of sensitive or painful teeth and may use non-surgical and surgical techniques to treat ailments. Endodontists also treat teeth that have suffered traumatic injuries, like cracks, or have been knocked out.

Oral and Maxillofacial Pathology

Oral and maxillofacial pathologists identify disorders that affect the mouth and facial region. They research and diagnose conditions using clinical, radiographic, microscopic, biochemical or other examinations.

Oral and Maxillofacial Radiology

Oral and maxillofacial radiologists assist general dentists and other oral-health specialists in the diagnostic assessments of a range of diseases in the head and neck. Oral and maxillofacial radiologists also use enhanced imaging techniques for other diagnostic purposes, such as locating tumors, joint disorders, infectious diseases of the jaw and trauma. They also provide advice in regulatory compliance to state agencies, as well as to the dental profession, in the uses and advances in radiologic technology.

Oral and Maxillofacial Surgeons

Often called oral surgeons, these specialists remove teeth, including wisdom teeth, and place dental implants. The practitioners perform surgery involving facial bones, jaws and overlying soft tissues. In addition, the surgeons treat oral and facial lesions, which often include cancer. They also use intravenous sedation or general anesthesia in either a hospital or office setting.

Orthodontists and Dentofacial Orthopedics

Orthodontists diagnose and treat crooked teeth and improperly formed jaws. These practitioners often work as a team with oral and maxillofacial surgeons and others to treat patients.



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Pediatric Dentists

Pediatric dentists have special training in treating children. The dentists provide care for infants and children through adolescence, including those with special needs.

Periodontists

Periodontists diagnose and treat disorders of gums and bony tissues. The practitioners offer non-surgical

and surgical treatment as well as place and maintain dental implants. They often diagnose and treat diseases of the mouth and diagnose and treat joint disorders.

Prosthodontists

Prosthodontists diagnose and treat patients who need crowns, bridges and partial or complete dentures. The practitioners provide diagnosis and restorative work for patients who have had dental implants placed by other surgical specialists. Some prosthodontists may place and maintain dental implants themselves.

Public Health

Public-health dentists treat dental diseases and promote dental health through government-controlled efforts in a community.

IS THERE A DIFFERENCE BETWEEN DMD AND DDS?

The Doctor of Dental Surgery (DDS) and Doctor of Dental Medicine (DMD) are the same degrees. The majority of

dental schools award the DDS degree; however, some award a DMD degree. The education and degrees are the same.

WHAT ARE MY INSURANCE OPTIONS?

Before selecting or changing dental insurance/dental coverage, there are some important things to consider:

Limited Access

Some plans require patients to choose a dentist from a limited list of dentists. Choosing from a list is not the same thing as freedom of choice. If your dentist is not on such a list, don't hesitate to ask why he or she has elected not to participate.


Payments

Most plans are designed to pay only a portion of your dental expenses. However, dental plans may exclude or discourage certain treatments, such as dental sealants, which can prevent tooth decay and save you money in the future.

Dental plans may use the terms "usual, customary and reasonable" to determine the portion of the dental treatment fee they will pay. If a plan doesn't cover a procedure that is recommended by your dentist, this does not mean that the treatment isn't appropriate or needed.

Coverage Restrictions

Some plans do not cover pre-existing conditions, such as missing teeth. Others may not cover dental implants, specialist referrals and other dental needs. Even when you and your dentist agree on the appropriate treatment method for your condition, the contract provision of the dental plan may only pay a portion, or pay only for the least expensive alternative treatment as determined by the insurance company.

For more information about dental plans, visit www.pelican dental.com. 

This story includes information compiled from the American Dental Association. For more information, visit www.floridadental.org or www.ada.org.