

## If It Ain't Broke...

Prevention is the gateway to a healthy mouth. Life teaches all of us that routine maintenance makes sense over the long haul. It's easier to never get out of shape than it is to constantly waiver between fad diets and exercise programs. If I can manage to eat my way through deer season and the upcoming holidays without gaining twenty pounds, I'll be much better off in January. If I binge and put on that old winter turkey neck, I'll have a lot of work to do before next fishing season.

Our teeth are designed amazingly well, as far as maintenance is concerned. They can withstand a lot of damage and wear before they actually start to hurt. This was a great attribute back when we humans were running around in tanned hides, eating nuts and berries, and chewing on the flesh and bones of our last kill. Our teeth could wear down and still do their job, relatively pain free. Heck, we even wore our teeth down enough and had big enough jaw bones to allow our wisdom teeth to fully erupt. Life was good, if not a little strenuous.

Then, along came civilization. We started to settle down and the next thing you know we're sitting behind a computer all day, sipping on a caffeine soda, and nibbling processed foods. We have become accustomed to a diet rife with peril for our teeth, not to mention all the other parts of our bodies.

It still amazes me that we routinely see people with all sorts of dental problems and no pain. Okay, I'm not that amazed because we see this quite often and the science behind the process is well understood, but it surprises me, none the less. Cavities, in their early stages, rarely hurt. If undetected, gum disease can sometimes progress until teeth start to get loose and fall out, with very little pain. Oral cancer can grow unnoticed and undetected, which is scary since oral cancer is one of the most serious and deadly forms we face.

Our job, as dentists, would be much easier if every little tooth problem hurt. Our lives, as people, would be miserable. Fortunately, technology is such that we can now show patients what we see in their mouths. Intraoral cameras and digital x-rays can be shown on a computer screen and are great educational tools. The proverbial picture is a thousand words. It doesn't take years of schooling to look at a broken down silver-mercury filling and see that something needs to be done. We can print out colored graphs that show the scope and depth of gum disease tooth by tooth. We are nearing a time when whole head scans can be done that will show a three dimensional picture of dental anatomy and disease. To a dental nerd like me, that's just cool.

Even with all of the tools above, one of the most common questions we get is, "Doc, how long can I wait until I get that fixed? It doesn't hurt right now."

I suspect that most often the question has more to do with a combination of time, insurance, past experience, inconvenience, money, and/or fear than it does with actually fixing broken down teeth. Dentists certainly understand that those are all important concerns. We all have to work health treatments into our lives and schedules.

So far, I've only come up with one decent answer to the question of when dental work actually needs to be performed. I'd like to claim it as my own, but it was actually passed on to me by a veteran dentist and mentor. He told his patients "Give us a call the day before it breaks or hurts and we'll be glad to work you in."

That makes perfect sense to me. Until next time, keep smiling.

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