

Healthy smiles for a lifetime: Basics of preventive dental care



We'll do whatever it takes and then some.

The true cost of a cavity

Did you know that the cost of a cavity over your lifetime can run as high as \$2,000? And did you know that most cavities can be avoided with easy and routine preventive care — including a regular dental health regimen, fluoridation and sealants?

Delta Dental plans have always emphasized diagnostic and preventive benefits, such as coverage for checkups so that you keep your mouth healthy and need fewer restorative services.

The daily routine

Many oral health problems, such as gum disease and tooth decay, can be prevented by a simple routine: brushing twice a day, flossing daily, eating a balanced diet and having regular dental checkups.

- Plaque is a sticky, colorless film that builds up on teeth every day. Bacteria in plaque produce acids that attack your teeth. To remove plaque buildup, brush your teeth twice a day with fluoridated toothpaste. The recommended brushing time is two to three minutes.
- Daily flossing helps remove plaque from places your toothbrush can't reach. If you find floss difficult to work with, use a floss holder, which can help insert floss in between teeth.
- Avoid starchy and sugary foods, which increase plaque. A healthy diet provides the nutrients necessary (vitamins A and C, in particular) to prevent gum disease.
- Avoid cigarettes and chewing tobacco, which may contribute to gum disease and oral cancer.

Fluoride

Fluoride is a beneficial and cost-effective way to prevent tooth decay in children and adults, according to the American Dental Association (ADA). Fluoride is a

compound of the element fluorine, which is present naturally in many foods and in water, soil and air.

According to the ADA, public water fluoridation is considered the most efficient and cost-effective way to prevent cavities. However, other sources of fluoridation need to be considered as a number of states or counties still don't have fluoridated tap water and many people drink bottled water.

If you or your children don't ingest much fluoridated water, here are some ways to add more fluoride to your diet:

- Use a fluoride toothpaste and mouth rinse and/or professionally-applied gels or varnishes.
- If you live in a community without a fluoridated water supply, take dietary fluoride supplements (tablets, drops or lozenges). Supplements are available by prescription and are intended for children ages six months to 16 years living without fluoridated water in their community.

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Caring for children's teeth

Good dental care is vital throughout a child's entire growing period — from before birth to the early 20s — so it is essential to teach good habits early. If you are aware of a few simple facts, you can help your child get off to a healthy start:

- Cleaning a child's teeth should begin when the first tooth is visible — at about age six months. Wipe a baby's teeth and gums with a soft, damp washcloth or gauze pad.
- If you give your child a bottle to take to bed, be sure it contains only water.
- Calcium is extremely important for strong teeth and to the structure of the face and jaws. Make sure your child drinks plenty of milk and eats other calcium-rich foods, such as low-fat yogurt and cheese. Discourage snacks that are high in sugar or starch and sticky foods, such as candy.
- Children who play sports should wear mouthguards, available at sports stores or from your dentist.
- Pay special attention to your child's teeth during the teen years, when almost all permanent teeth are in. Decay most often occurs during this time, due to dietary changes and inadequate dental hygiene.

Caring for seniors' smiles

As we get older, our dental needs become increasingly specialized. Because our dental needs may be different than they once were, regular visits to the dentist are essential. Although many seniors wear dentures, adult tooth loss is often a result of preventable oral disease.

Here are other factors to consider when keeping smiles healthy for seniors:

- Many seniors affected by medical conditions take medications that can adversely interact with dental anesthesia and may cause changes to the oral tissues. Seniors should keep their dentist informed of any changes or updates in their medical history to prevent potentially harmful drug interactions.
- Plaque will stick to dentures just as it does to natural teeth. If plaque is not removed, buildup can lead to discomfort, sores, infection and even bone loss. Seniors should ask their dentist about how to properly care for dentures.
- Family members can play an active role by helping to schedule regular dental visits for homebound seniors or those in nursing homes.

Some information courtesy of the Academy of General Dentistry

Sealants

A recent study, conducted by the Dental Data and Analysis Center, shows that sealants (thin plastic coatings that protect the chewing surfaces of teeth from decay), especially when combined with professional fluoride treatments, are among the best tools to help children fight tooth decay early in their lives.

Check your Delta Dental Evidence of Coverage booklet to see if your plan includes coverage for sealants. Usually, sealants are covered when applied to first molars through age 8 and second molars through age 15. However, coverage under some plans may be different.

Sealants can be applied by either your dentist or a registered dental hygienist, and application takes less time than having a tooth filled. It is a very simple, painless procedure.