

"MY" X-RAYS

Dear Dr. McCrummen: I recently moved here and had asked for my x-rays from my previous dental office. They said they would send copies to my future dentist. I wanted the original ones, not copies, but they said they couldn't give them to me. I paid for them so why can't I have them? Also, they said if I wanted copies for myself I would have to pay for them? Why do I have to pay twice? Why are they so important? Are they accurate? M.C.

It is true that the dentist must keep the original x-rays in their office. Diagnoses, treatment, charting, health history, and the x-rays from which treatment and diagnosis came from all must stay in your folder together, and are the property of the original office. Copies needed for future treatment or comparisons can be made, and are completely acceptable and expected by other offices and insurance companies.

The fee you paid was for the procedure, time reserved for you alone, sterilization, the room setup, the use of the equipment (x-ray units are very expensive, especially the new digital type), disposable supplies, the education, certification, safety skills and wages of the x-ray technician and support personnel, and the diagnosis time and skills of the dentist. If you request copies be sent to another dental office it is often done as a courtesy, though some offices do charge a minor fee. If you are requesting extra copies for yourself a small fee is often charged for a trained staff member to take the time, and use supplies, chemicals, special equipment, and a special dark room to copy, develop, and mount the x-rays. Each office has their own policy but a fee is usual and customary for personal copies, and is usually a lot less than the costs to copy them.

The new dentist will need some current x-rays to do a comprehensive and up-to-date examination, a copy of your last complete set (around 18 pictures, taken every 3-5 years), and the last *panoramic* x-ray (usually every 3-5 years) for comparison, to look for changes. It is generally not good to release copies to a patient that is moving as they are often lost or damaged in the move, and then they must be copied again and sent. It is best to have your new dental office request the pertinent x-rays prior to your first visit. They do not usually need all past x-rays, and they do not need any written records unless there is a specific need. A periodontal (gum disease) chart is helpful if there is a history of disease and gum treatment, but it can be requested later. The new doctor needs to know your current condition. Many patients ask that their whole chart with all of their records be sent, and that is not legally possible or desirable by your future dentist.

Regarding why they are so important, x-rays show where we cannot see visually. Over 2/5th's of the external part of the tooth cannot be visualized. We cannot visually see cavities between teeth, the bone level of gum disease, tumors, cysts, or abscess in the early, painless stages, cracks, cavities under fillings or around crowns, arthritis or damaged jaw joints, and many other things without the x-ray as a tool. Early diagnosis and treatment of small problems can save you much more money than a late diagnosis leading to complex, and possible prolonged or uncomfortable treatment. X-ray accuracy is about 75%, which is very high but it only shows certain types of problems. Visually, the accuracy is much lower, but the combination of x-ray and visual give us a very good idea if there is a problem. Some things we simply cannot detect. An x-ray will usually only show 1/2 the depth of a cavity, which means yearly x-rays help show us changes. There is no 100%, but our tools (x-rays, eyes, and other things like cavity detecting lasers) help to catch problems early, to your benefit.

"I am fine, nothing hurts", is often heard as a reason to not see the dentist or have x-rays or a cleaning. Pain is a very poor symptom to choose before seeing a dentist. If something hurts, nerves are involved, healing is often delayed, and problems can be deep and severe. Be proactive by being checked regularly so your dentist can treat you more comfortably and at less expense.