

A FEW X-RAY QUESTIONS

Dear Dr. McCrummen:

(Q) If dental x-rays are so safe why do you leave the room?

(A) Most people only need an x-ray evaluation once a year but dental assistants take x-rays every day. It can involve one to eighteen pictures of the teeth and/ or a panoramic x-ray to show the jaw bones and joints. A person gets more of this type of radiation from being outside in the sun for the day, or taking a high altitude airline flight, than from dental x-rays. Dental x-rays are weaker than medical x-rays, but the benefits of detecting any hidden problem far outweigh the risks of exposure. With the use of the new "Digital X-ray Systems", a person receives about 1/10th of normal dental x-ray exposure, which is already very little. Wearing a lead apron reduces concerns about dental x-rays affecting other parts of the body. However, the x-rays are focused to a small, two inch area, the tube prevents scatter, and x-rays do not linger or travel around the body.

(Q) X-rays seem like a waste of money. Why do I need them?

(A) Routine x-rays actually save people money because they help the dentist detect problems in the painless, more easily treatable stages. Refusing x-rays often costs many times more than the fee for the x-rays. Without x-rays there is little chance of catching a problem when it is small and cheaper to fix. Dental problems occur more often in the areas that your dentist cannot see, where microscopic bacteria hide.

(Q) What if I do not want x-rays since my teeth feel fine?

(A) "Feeling fine" is what most people experience during the early stages of disease. One does not feel cancer, osteoporosis, impacted wisdom teeth, high blood pressure, high cholesterol, and many other ailments in the early stages. Tests are needed, and x-rays are a type of test. Your dentist is there to help find problems as soon as possible. They cannot do their job to help you if necessary tests are refused. If a person declines the basic things that a dentist must do for a person's wellbeing, like periodic examinations and x-rays at an appropriate interval, it pushes the dentist to their legal and ethical limits. Future treatment in that office may not be possible. Though one may erroneously think it is a money issue, a dental office gains nothing by losing a patient.

(Q) I am pregnant and have a toothache. Will x-rays harm my baby?

(A) Having a toothache, pain, infection, and waiting until you need strong drugs are much greater risks for your pregnancy and the health of your baby. Dentists will usually recommend against routine x-rays, mainly for peace of mind for the expectant mother. However, dental x-rays are considered safe, and all x-rays required for emergency treatment are necessary. If you wear a lead apron there should be absolutely no reason to not feel your baby is safe. Only the area where the x-rays are taken is exposed, and only to a very small extent.

Billions of dental x-rays have been taken, many each day worldwide, with old and new equipment. We do not see cases of cancer or problems associated with x-rays in the cheeks, gums, or teeth that are exposed. If you are extremely concerned about dental x-rays don't refuse them, just re-educate yourself. Tell your dentist about it and ask questions. If your dentist has the standard x-ray system there is nothing to worry about, but if you are very concerned look for a dentist that uses digital x-rays. Always use a lead apron, and ask for one that covers the thyroid gland in your neck, or just bring the apron up to cover the lower part of your neck. Dental x-rays are part of providing the very best care for our patients.