

X-RAY RADIATION AND EXAMINATION CONCERNS

Dear Dr. McCrummen: I am concerned about dental x-rays and if they are harmful. My dentist says that they cannot continue to clean my teeth or fix teeth without x-rays. That I would have to try to find a dentist that would not require x-rays, and he said that would be difficult. I don't want x-rays and read that they are harmful. I really don't want an examination, either, since my teeth feel fine. Why do I have to have these things when I just want my teeth cleaned. I have insurance but don't use it much. D.L.D.

Dentists have moral, ethical, and legal concerns in providing health care. There are risks that you could suffer from a dental problem later if it is not diagnosed in the early, "feel fine" stage. Diagnosis comes mainly from both visual and x-ray means, and there are other tools available to provide a more comprehensive examination. A periodic examination, usually every 6 months, is often required to be an active patient of record.

Your hygienist, though very well trained and fully able to see some problems, is not officially "responsible" for diagnosing disease. If you were only seen for cleanings it would not be the hygienist's fault for not detecting a problem that might otherwise be found during a comprehensive examination by the doctor. Offices work as a team in providing health care so if hygienists or assistants see a potential problem during a non-examination time the dentist is alerted.

Not feeling that there is a problem is not a good reason to decline an examination and x-rays. Cancer, heart disease, high blood pressure, TB, HIV, and many more problems are not felt in the early, more treatable stages. Dental problems are just the same. Once a person feels pain, conservative treatment may not be possible. Root canals, crowns, or loss of teeth may be the only options. It is best not to wait for pain to be what brings you back for an examination. Six month examination visits are recommended for your sake and encouraged by dental insurance companies. They know they will pay less if you have problems detected and fixed when they are small.

Dental x-rays contain some of the same components of radiation that comes from being outdoors, from the earth and sun. A typical dental x-ray is equivalent to being outdoors for about 12 hours. If your dentist is using a digital x-ray system, an x-ray is like being outdoors for about one hour. A flight from L.A to New York can be about the same as a full set of 18 x-rays, yet pilots and crew do not have a higher incidence of cancer than we on the ground. X-rays are very safe and are recommended yearly for most people. Dental x-rays focus in a two inch diameter circle area of the jaw and are extremely low dose compared to chest x-rays, and especially cancer treatment x-rays. Hundreds of thousands of x-rays are taken worldwide each working day, and for decades, yet no problems have been detected in those areas of the cheek or gums related to dental x-rays.

The benefits of detecting a problem, like a cavity, gum disease, an abscess, tumor, cyst, or other anomaly is much greater than the risks of extremely low dose dental x-rays. They do not travel to other parts of the body, or build-up in the tissues. Wearing a lead apron with a thyroid collar should give peace of mind. There are no restrictions on taking dental x-rays when needed for pregnant women or people that have gone through radiation treatment in other areas of the body.

Cavities can get deep quickly, gum disease continues silently, and abscesses may not hurt until you are vacationing in Hawaii. Let your dentist help you. You deserve comfort and good health. Without good health how well can you function and how well do you feel? No one likes the inconvenience of an emergency, especially one you can prevent.