

ORAL HEALTH ALERT 2009

The Problem to be Alerted to:

The nationwide/worldwide recession problems are adversely affecting individual health and creating scenarios that are increasing personal discomfort and oral healthcare costs. Generally, people are declining preventive care, diagnosis, and treatment of known problems, leading to pain and suffering, loss of work, emergency visits, higher costs, loss of quality of life, and even loss of life.

Unlike many other medical conditions, oral disease is highly preventable, but the general population is putting-off the relatively inexpensive oral procedures that can prevent or control health problems. Oral disease has been shown to directly contribute to the severity of heart (cardio-vascular) disease, respiratory and multiple organ diseases, diabetes, cholesterol, as well as cause pregnancy and infant complications, and reduces the immune systems' efficiency.

One fact is the majority of the world's population does not take the time needed each day to prevent dental disease by flossing and brushing effectively and using fluoride, or take advantage of the many benefits from regularly scheduled professional assistance even if they have insurance. Another fact is our nation's population consumes excessive amounts of sugar and acid. Dentists and hygienists should see their patients regularly for "recall/recare" examination, cleaning, and x-rays, to allow early detection of oral disease, make suggestions to improve homecare effectiveness, and control or treat problems when they are small. This helps preserve esthetics, speech, comfort, function, and reduces individual healthcare investments.

Nationwide, more and more people are declining cleaning visits, dental examinations, and/or x-rays, feeling they are saving money. What they do not realize is they are saving "a little" money short term. When a problem is "felt" later it has progressed to affect the nerves, which can then cost well over 10 times the early treatment fees by needing urgent care, complex treatment, and can lead to loss of teeth and filling spaces later.

"I feel fine, so I don't need x-rays today", or "I need to save some money and want to skip the examination today", or "I'll wait and schedule my cleaning visit when times are better", are all commonly heard nationwide and understandable in these difficult times. In my 33 years of healthcare experience I have found the people that avoid the small cost of preventive care often pay much more in the future, for root canal therapy and crowns, or loss of teeth leading to bridges, implants, uncomfortable "false teeth", or leaving a space that creates a myriad of future problems and discomfort; avoidance of dentists is what costs so much, not dentistry. I have seen good health quickly change to poor health, and many problems that could have been intercepted at low cost. Stress affects almost everyone these days, and it, alone, increases cavities and gum disease. Age, menopause, and many medications can cause a "dry mouth", especially heart, anti-anxiety and anti-depressant medication. A "dry mouth" leads to increased oral disease. Cavities form within 15 minutes of sugar consumption.

Recall (preventive, return dental visits are commonly referred to as, "Recall" or "Recare"):

Your Cleaning Appointment Typically Includes: Health update, checking of present gum condition (gingivitis or periodontitis) and comparing with past documentation, scaling (cleaning out debris and organisms that cause disease below the gumline that affects “whole-body health”), tartar removal, cleaning plaque off the teeth above the gumline, reduction of stain, polishing the teeth, providing a protective fluoride treatment, oral hygiene instructions, recommendations of new products to improve your health or reduce disease and expense, and determine the most effective return interval for you to maintain good health.

Your Periodic Examination Typically Includes: Check for changes since your last examination, searching for conflicts with all new medications and herbs, blood pressure check, head and neck evaluation (dentists often detect skin cancer), feel for swollen lymph nodes (a sign of disease), check the thyroid size and shape (dentists often detect thyroid cancers), check the TMJ (temporo-mandibular jaw joint) for damage or arthritis, check for oral cancer (a disfiguring and often deadly cancer of which there are approximately 35,000 new cases a year, a fourth being found in non-tobacco users) and other oral disease, re-check x-rays, gum-disease, cavity, and damage check (teeth with large fillings often crack, and old fillings break), discuss findings, offer all reasonable options, make recommendations and suggest a treatment-plan, and recommend new products and techniques to help reduce dental problems and expenses. The dental team tries to provide a wealth of information to each patient, and a wide variety of options, including doing nothing. Risks and benefits of each are also discussed so each patient can make an informed and educated decision on their healthcare. All patients should be treated with compassion and respect, and be truly listened to.

Your X-Ray Evaluation Typically Includes: Using current x-rays (very low radiation, considered insignificant with “digital” x-rays) to compare with past x-rays for changes, and checking for cavities between teeth, bone infection, cysts, tumors, arthritis, osteoporosis, and abnormalities not physically or visually detectable, and not yet “felt” or noticed. Many cancers and medical problems can be first detected in dental x-rays, including hardening of the arteries, cysts, and tumors, and referrals can be made to medical specialists for rapid diagnosis and treatment.

Help your dentists to help you avoid high costs of treatment by being seen regularly, before you have symptoms, such as pain and swelling. Ask how your office may be able to help you afford dental care and prevent problems during this historically depressed time. Prevention requires a team approach, but remember you are the most important participant.