

Dental checkups crucial for heading off trouble

By Dr. Eric Gustavsen, Published in the Walla Walla Union Bulletin 10/14/11

A common question we hear in the dental office is “Why do I need to get my teeth cleaned every six months?” This is really an excellent question because it gets to the heart of what we as dental professionals are trying to do; prevent problems.

Our most important task is checking for the beginning signs of oral cancer. In addition to that there are really two main concerns or problems that your hygienist and dentist are trying to help you prevent: Cavities and periodontal (gum) disease. Both primarily caused by hell raising bacteria.

Cavities typically take six months to go from hardly detectable in the outer shell, or enamel, part of the tooth to busting through to the softer chewy middle dentin part of the tooth. From the dentin it is often a cakewalk to the nerve. If the hygienist or dentist brings a persons attention to the area that is beginning to decay, they can change whatever habit is causing the decay in time to halt or reverse the process. Often it's unspooling neglected floss, using the toothbrush more effectively, and getting a prescription level toothpaste. The mission of these tools is to scrape off the bacteria that love sugar for breakfast, eat enamel for lunch, then belch acid on your teeth in appreciation of a sweet dinner. You can easily starve these bad boys with a few simple changes in drink and diet. This timely advice, if followed, can save people money they would otherwise have to spend on fillings, and save them time away from work. Prevention through 6-month checkups and cleanings is the least expensive way to keep your teeth healthy.

The second reason for a routine of six months is that the average healthy person builds up some hard deposits on their teeth and six months is about how long it takes for this tarter to start causing problems. When the hygienist sees you she/he will check your gums with a little measuring instrument to make sure they are healthy. The gums hang onto the neck of the tooth with little Velcro like fibers and this little measuring device should slide into this natural space, called a pocket in our secret lingo, for a measurement of 2 or 3

millimeters. A measurement of 4 is a big warning flag and a deeper measurement of 5 or higher means trouble! This is an essential part of checking if your gums are healthy. Any sign of bleeding means there is an INFECTION; aka periodontal disease. Periodontal disease, after it sinks its talons into you, can be very nasty to shake off. The bacteria scuttle down the neck of the tooth and set up clandestine cloning colonies. Undisturbed, this assembly line starts pumping out millions of bacteria. The scouts from your immune systems headquarters will discover the colonies and call for help. The immune system musters the Marines to come and destroy the colonies. The Marines flood the bloodstream heading in the general direction of the infection. On arrival they don't send in the snipers. They unleash everything they have at the colony, M16's, grenades, mortars, land mines and cluster bombs. The colony throws up a chemical shield and halts production. The war is won, right? Wrong! This colony now burrows down into the gums, as far away from oxygen as it can get... and waits for things to quite down. Meanwhile the collateral damage from the Marines (immune system) has destroyed the Velcro that holds the gum to the tooth, obliterated precious bone, and most interestingly makes the gums bleed. There's that sign of infection again! Healthy gums don't bleed.

If the gums are healthy, with no bleeding areas when checked, for the majority of people six



months is the best interval to keep them healthy. If there are infected areas and the Velcro has been detached and the measuring instrument slides down giving a reading of 4, 5, or 6, the infection needs to be removed. Most people are surprised to learn the difference between the measurements of healthy gums and very sick gums is only about the thickness of a quarter!

These colonies take about 90 days to get up to production levels again so if a person has been diagnosed with periodontal disease they will need to have their gums cared for every 3 to 4 months.

Startling new research has connected the mouth with the rest of the body (that's an example of tongue in cheek dental humor). Considerable evidence shows that bacteria from your gums enter your bloodstream through ulcerated spots in bleeding gums and roam the body looking to establish satellite communities. The Marines (immune system) in trying to destroy these entities cause a body wide increase in inflammatory chemicals, which cause a persons risk for other common problems such as diabetes, heart disease, stroke and certain types of arthritis to shoot up.

That's why USA Today in an article entitled 10 Tips for Living to 100 placed this advice at #2. "Floss Every Day. That may help keep your arteries healthy.... flossing reduces the amount of gum disease causing bacteria. These bacteria are thought to enter the bloodstream and trigger inflammation in the arteries, a major risk for heart disease."

Seeing your dental team every 6 months for a preventative checkup and cleaning is part of an overall healthy lifestyle that saves you from tooth trouble, and may prolong your life!