

Practice prevention to avoid dental problems

By Dr. James Rubin

Many of the dental problems I see every day in the dental clinic at the Knox County Health Department including gingivitis and tooth decay, could be avoided with some simple preventative measures.

You hear gingivitis mentioned a lot in toothpaste ads. So, what is it? Gingivitis is identified as inflammation confined to the soft tissue in your mouth, i.e., your gums. If you look in the mirror and your gums are red and swollen or if your gums bleed when you brush and floss, then you probably have gingivitis. Don't worry. Gingivitis, sometimes referred to as gum disease, is treatable, and if treated early, will not cause permanent damage.

Gingivitis is actually a bacterial infection caused by plaque, a sticky, colorless film that forms on your teeth. The plaque produces toxins that irritate the gums and causes the inflammation. If the plaque is not removed, the gum tissues can be damaged, causing them to pull away from the teeth and if it continues to go untreated



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can move further down the tooth root and eventually cause the tooth to become loose.

To avoid gingivitis and any tooth decay in general, brush your teeth for two to three minutes, twice a day. Use a brush with soft bristles and be sure to brush your gums and your tongue. Use any kind of toothpaste you like as long as it contains fluoride. The brand or extra features you choose don't really matter.

Also floss daily to remove plaque from places your toothbrush can't reach. The best floss is the one you like to use. So whether it's waxed or flavored or wide or regular size, it does not matter. Floss of any type helps clean and remove plaque. Additionally, use a mouth rinse which can reduce the plaque by 20 percent. If you like to chew gum, choose a sugarless gum with xylitol which inhibits the growth of bacteria.

The same bacteria that causes gingivitis also contributes to tooth decay, thanks to sugar which is in just about everything we eat and drink. The average person in the U.S. consumes close to 100 lbs. of sugar a year. If you drink one can of regular pop a day, you will consume 35 lbs. of sugar in a year. Each time you consume sugar you are feeding the bacterial film that food leaves on your teeth. That's why it is important to brush after you eat. Try to limit your sugar consumption to no more than three times a day. Use a sugar substitute if possible.

It's also important to visit a dentist for regular checkups and cleanings. Your dentist can give your teeth a super cleaning and remove any cavities, but it is your responsibility to help prevent further problems by brushing and watching what you eat. Prevention is a key component of public health and it is practiced daily at the health department's dental clinic. Prevention should be part of your daily routine, too. This is public health.