

Cavities. Can they wait?

Can it wait; do I have to do it now? These are frequently asked questions by patients after they have been diagnosed with caries. What we should be asking ourselves is can we afford to wait?

Dental Caries is a bacterial disease. Caries is caused by acids produced by bacteria in dental plaque. Plaque is a soft, sticky, thin film of bacteria, and food debris that develops on the tooth surface about 24 hours after the tooth is cleaned. Mutans streptococci are a group of bacteria that grow in plaque and can cause caries. These bacteria adhere well to the tooth surface, produce higher amounts of acid from sugars than other bacterial types, can survive better than other bacteria in an acid environment, and produce extracellular polysaccharides from sucrose. Infection with mutans streptococci usually happens early in childhood via transmission from the mouths of parents or playmates. Eventually soft plaque mineralizes becoming calculus (hard plaque or tartar), which cannot easily be removed with a toothbrush.

Caries is a transmissible bacterial infection. By waiting or not getting cavities filled we allow the bacteria to multiply and grow. Other teeth can become infected and develop caries and more cavities which need to be filled. More caries and bacteria increase the chances of transmitting caries causing bacteria to our children and significant others leading to cavities in their teeth which need to be filled. More caries in our teeth and the teeth of our family members means more cavities which need to be filled increasing the total cost of treatment.

When cavities are small, a small inexpensive restoration removes the decay, fills the cavity and decreases the chances of getting more cavities. When the cavity is not treated it grows bigger and infects more teeth surfaces. This means the filling gets larger and the cost to treat the filling increases.

When the cavity infects the nerve, costs now go up dramatically. Root canal treatment now must be performed and when the root canal is completed a crown will be needed to protect the remaining tooth structure.

If the cavity has invaded all surfaces of the tooth and there is insufficient tooth structure to support a filling or crown then the tooth is now unrestorable and needs to be extracted. Replacing a missing tooth is significantly more costly than a filling. Replacing a missing tooth requires a bridge or implant and crown.

Untreated decay can also cause infection around existing crowns or bridges leading to significant costs associated with replacing the crown or bridge.

The rate or speed at which caries progresses or gets larger is unpredictable. In some people it is a slow progression and in others a mere few months causes an incredible spread of decay requiring more involved treatment which increases costs. There is no way to predict on which end of the spectrum one will fall. What is predictable is that decay diagnosed and treated promptly does save money over the long term.

And remember, dental caries is a preventable disease for most people with a healthy diet, regularly brushing at least twice a day, and flossing at least once a day. Also drinking water with fluoride and using toothpaste with fluoride helps to remineralize and strengthen teeth. Finally, regular checkups and cleanings every 6 months with your dentist can help to keep your teeth healthy.

Written by Carlos Vallecillo, DDS and Rossana Menna, DDS
www.monalisadental.com