

What happens if I do not get that cavity fixed?

During a comprehensive exam your dentist will check to see if you have cavities. They will look at your x-rays and check for cavities using a dental explorer and mirror. A dental explorer is a sharp instrument which is used to check the surfaces of your teeth for holes or soft spots which would indicate a cavity.

Dental Caries or a cavity 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.

The development of a cavity or dental Caries is dependent on dietary sucrose or sugar. Mutans streptococci use sugar to produce acids which attack the tooth surface. The acids in plaque dissolve the enamel surface of the tooth and create holes in the tooth or dental cavities. A diet with a high sugar intake will increase caries risk. Caries risk is also dependent on the frequency of eating. Each time that plaque bacteria come into contact with food or drink containing sugar they use them to produce acids. If these acids are not buffered or neutralized by saliva they dissolve the surface of the tooth. As the surface of the tooth dissolves a hole or soft spot develops.

If your dentist finds a cavity he will offer treatment which is usually a filling. The caries is removed and a white or silver filling material is placed in the hole which was left behind.

At this point many patients ask “What happens if I do not get that cavity fixed?” If a cavity is not treated then it will continue to get larger, as it gets larger more bacteria breed and cavities begin to form on adjacent teeth and eventually throughout the mouth. As the cavity gets bigger then it starts to become sensitive to sweets. The tooth can break as the cavity gets large enough to undermine the support of the tooth surface or the enamel. Then a slight pain to cold begins which starts getting more constant over time and eventually turns into a constant throbbing pain. Now you are now not able to bite down on the tooth or maybe a swelling has suddenly. These symptoms are an indication that the cavity has injured the nerve of a tooth and that a root canal may be needed. So the cavity which only needed a filling has now become a much more costly endeavor and now needs a root canal and a crown and in addition there likely are other teeth that now have cavities needing treatment.

When caries has been detected the least costly and minimal treatment is to have the tooth restored to prevent the caries from getting larger, which could lead to more extensive and expensive treatments, and infecting other teeth with caries as well. Treatment usually consists of removing the caries and filling the cavity that remains with a filling material.

Dental caries is a preventable disease for most people with regular 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