

The Dental Exam: An Overview

The dental exam is critical to your ongoing oral health. It consists, in part, of the dentist looking inside your mouth for things that can affect your oral – and your overall – health. The dental exam can catch problems early before you see or feel them and when they are much easier and less expensive to treat.

Here is some of what your dentist is looking for during a dental exam:

- damaged, missing, or decayed teeth
- early signs of cavities
- condition of your gums, such as periodontal pockets, inflammation, or other signs of gum disease (which can lead to tooth loss and bone loss)
- to see how previous dental work such as root canals, fillings, and crowns are holding up
- early signs of mouth or throat cancer, such as white lesions or blocked salivary glands
- other suspicious growths or cysts
- position of your teeth (e.g., spacing, bite)
- signs that you clench or grind your teeth (a treatable problem that can cause headache or sore jaw and can, if serious, lead to hearing loss and tooth loss)
- signs of bleeding or inflammation on your tongue and on the roof or floor of your mouth
- the overall health and function of your temporomandibular joint (which joins the jaw to skull), checking for signs of disorders that can cause pain or tenderness
- the general condition of the bones in your face, jaw, and around your mouth

As well as the visual inspection of your mouth, the exam includes:

- a complete medical history so the dentist will know about any health conditions that may affect the success of dental treatments or procedures and that may be associated with oral health problems.

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Sometimes it will also include:

- an examination of your neck area, with the dentist feeling the glands and lymph nodes for possible signs of inflammation that could indicate general health problems
- dental X-rays, if necessary. These can show such problems as cavities under existing fillings, hairline fractures, impacted wisdom teeth, decay under your gum line, and bone loss caused by gum disease.

Checklist

Be Sure to Tell Your Dentist

Your dentist will explain what's happening during the dental exam and give you a summary of the findings. However, the more your dentist knows about your overall health, the more effective they can be in addressing your oral health care needs.

Be sure to let your dentist know:

1. Any new medical conditions you've been diagnosed with since your last visit, such as diabetes or AIDS, even if they don't seem pertinent. Your dentist needs to know to properly manage your treatment and prevention program.
 2. Any new medications you're taking (side effects can often include dry mouth and overgrown gums)
 3. If you're pregnant
 4. If you have any allergies
 5. Any changes you've noticed in your teeth, such as changes in colour, looseness, or position
 6. Any changes you've noticed in your gums, such as bleeding when you brush or floss, or changes in appearance
 7. Any increased sensitivity to heat, cold, or sweets
 8. Whether your floss catches on rough edges, causing it to shred
 9. Any colour changes in the skin on the inside of your mouth
 10. If you smoke or chew tobacco (which increases the likelihood of oral cancer)
 11. If your neck or jaw muscles are tight, or you're aware of clenching or grinding your teeth
 12. If you're nervous about going to the dentist. New ways of doing things have made modern dentistry more comfortable for patients, and talking to your dentist may reassure you and help you feel more relaxed.
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