



TOOTHFULLY SPEAKING!

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Why we are losing teeth ... still?!

Dental awareness campaigns in the 1970s and the introduction of fluoride into toothpastes and municipal waters are responsible for the decline in cavities and "tooth decay". Today's dental graduates will never see the rates of dental decay as we saw in earlier generations. They will never know about the extent to which tooth decay was the primary source of tooth loss in North America - in fact before the 1980s 80% of people lost teeth before the age of 50. The financial burden of diagnosing, preventing, treating and retreating dental caries, in 1989 was estimated at \$3.1 billion, higher than many medical conditions!

We owe thanks for these public health improvements to health educators working in school systems, and awareness campaigns from public health departments and dental organizations. Today everyone visits the dentist regularly for "checkups" and thus dental caries were caught earlier and fewer teeth were lost. But 25% of children and 50% of adolescents still get cavities despite all the knowledge. And how does this translate into adulthood? Over 50% of adults have dental caries!

How do cavities occur? Plaque! Everyone has been indoctrinated with the evils of plaque but what are the deets? Our mouth is a very unique ecosystem with over 500 different bacterial species. If the natural balance in pH, nutrient status etc. shifts significantly, bacteria with harmful effects can begin to dominate. For example, in people eating a diet high in simple carbohydrates or sugars, the pH of their mouths will drop compared to people with a more healthy diet. This in turn leads to a significant increase in harmful acid-tolerating bacteria. Once the bacterial ecosystem is unbalanced by too many "bad" bacteria then dental disease happens! Fluoride can help combat these "bad" bacteria, strengthening the tooth by remineralizing it, and newer research out of Germany has shown that fluoride also reduces the adhesion or attachment of "bad" bacteria to the tooth enamel or dentin.

We know that the earlier in life one gets a cavity, the greater the chance that tooth will be lost later in life. All fillings have similar risks of fracture, leakage, wear and tear etc. and each subsequent replacement results in increasing destruction until eventually a crown may be needed, which also is at risk for caries or a root canal... and so the story continues. Crowns, bridges and root canals also fracture and breakdown leaving tooth loss!

As we age, many of us also experience other medical health issues, such as hypertension, diabetes, arthritis to name a few, which can place us on multiple medicines. Unfortunately almost all these medications have the side effects of "xerostomia," or dry mouth. Reduced salivary flow in the mouth reduces the pH, which is a lightning rod for those "bad" bacteria to run amok in your mouth and that small filling will become a magnet for recurrent cavities and breakdown later in life!! Especially at a time when our ability to floss and brush is reduced due to issues such as arthritis!

Dental caries is largely preventable! Let's teach our children and youth that good habits early on will save health care dollars and teeth, and fruits and vegetables can be chewed efficiently when we are in our 80s and 90s!

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