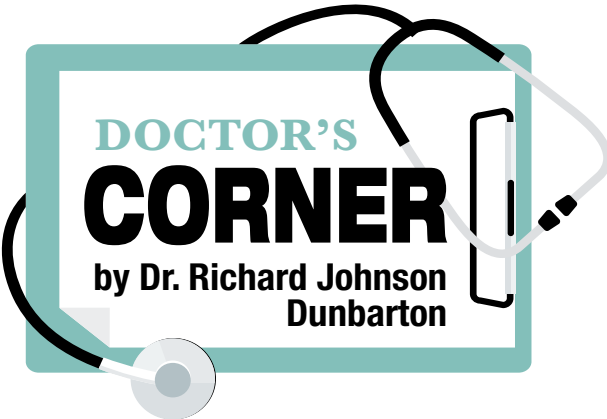




ORAL HEALTH

The health of your mouth, teeth, and gums is a good predictor of your health in general. According to the CDC, more than half of all children and adolescents have had cavities in their permanent teeth, and almost all adults have had cavities in their permanent teeth. So, what is the problem with a dental cavity? Think about tooth decay as occurring in stages. Demineralization is the first stage. Then comes enamel decay and a cavity may become noticeable. Dentin decay is next. This is the layer just beneath the enamel. It is much “softer” than enamel, and once bacteria get to this level cavities are rapidly formed and may be sensitive. The pulp is the innermost layer of a tooth, and in this layer travel the nerves and blood vessels. With a cavity reaching this depth you most likely will experience pain and there may be swelling and tenderness of your gums. If all this is left untreated a pocket of pus will form (abscess) at the tip of the dental root. This infection can spread to other parts of your body. The popular saying: “An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure” is certainly true here. Good oral hygiene is essential. Brushing your teeth with a fluoride toothpaste after every meal, or at least morning and evening, is the first step. Then there is the flossing that, if you are like me, can be hard to incorporate into the ritual of brushing. I am always reminded by dental professionals of the importance of getting rid of food and plaque between the teeth!

Should we get rid of the bacteria in our mouth. No! There are over 700 different kinds of bacteria in our “oral microbiome,” and many are there for our defense and to aid in the digestion of food. The problems arise when there is an imbalance and “bad” bacteria feed on sugar and starch producing acids that erode enamel and start the process of forming a dental cavity.

Oral cancer is more common in men and older people. Tobacco and alcohol use are among the leading causes of oral cancer. In North America and Europe, human papillomavirus infections are responsible for a growing percentage of oral cancers among young people. Trauma can cause significant dental problems; hence one should use protective equipment when engaging in sporting events.

The 3-3-3 rule for oral hygiene is a good starting point: brush three times a day, for three minutes each session, and replace your toothbrush or brush head every three months. Having a dental exam at least once a year will not only identify and treat cavities; it is also a good way to screen for gum disease and oral cancer. Your personal dentist is a gate keeper for good oral health and healthy living.

Information for this article was gleaned from:
my.clevelandclinic.org/health/diseases/10946-cavities
www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/oral-health



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