

HEALTH

Medical management of dental cavities has improved

By Christopher T. Reynolds
CONTRIBUTOR

Dentistry in the past has largely been seen as "tooth carpentry." The dentist checked your teeth for cavities and restored the cavity in the tooth using a filling material.

You might have returned for another check-up in a year, and new cavities were

found. The cycle continued. Although the restorative aspect of dentistry remains an essential part of dental care, new advances have been made in treating dental decay medically.

The "Medical Model of Caries Control" is a step-wise process that changes the oral environment from one that promotes tooth decay to one that resists it. Tooth decay (dental caries) is a

specific set of bacteria that feed off sugars and dissolves tooth structures. It is infectious, meaning it can be transferred from tooth to tooth. The first step in fighting decay remains the same as our traditional model: we identify and treat restoratively.

Oral hygiene instruction and reinforcement is still a mainstay in prevention. The medical model goes further to seal out any other niches where dental caries can hide. Decay-causing bacteria hide in the grooves of teeth, making sealants extremely important in prevention of further breakdown.

Now that you are cavity free and the bacteria have no place to hide, we can attack the bacteria while it is vulnerable. A high-strength fluoride toothpaste can be dispensed directly from a dental office or obtained from most local pharmacies with a prescription.

Your dentist or hygienist can painlessly and easily apply an ultra-concen-

trated fluoride varnish to the teeth. This remains in place until you brush and floss it off. If done three times within two weeks, it has shown to be effective in killing the cavity-causing bacteria.

This resets the oral environment. Healthy oral bacteria can then flourish, and disease-causing bacteria are prevented from inhabiting the mouth.

Saliva testing can very easily be done to check whether our efforts have reduced your risk or if you need further rinses or other products to fight the disease.

The cutting edge of tooth decay prevention has changed from surgical treatment to medical therapy. Being proactive in treating the disease as we age will reduce the cost and necessity of extensive dental treatment.

Christopher Reynolds, DDS, is owner of Dynamic Dentistry in Bluffton.



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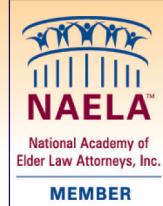
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