

Your Dental Health

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It is well known that our dental health program in Interior Alaska has not yet reached everyone needing dental services. This is especially true about the people in the rural communities. However, everyone understands how important it is to take care of our teeth which is a part of our total well-being.

No. 11 — What the Dentist Does

Most of the treatment provided by the dentist today is pain free. In fact, many patients who go to their dentist for regular care never know what it is to experience dental discomfort.

One of the simplest yet most important things a dentist does is to take x-ray pictures of your teeth and supporting bone structures.

Such x-rays are essential because they not only spot hidden cavities and the early signs of gum diseases but they can even save your life by detecting certain types of oral cancer early when they are curable.

Providing modern dental care without x-rays would be like asking someone to fix the engine of your car without looking under the hood. The x-rays can help your dentist see inside your teeth and jaws, hidden areas between the teeth and the portion of your teeth beneath the gums.

For example, small cavities that are concealed beneath old fillings may go undetected without the use of x-rays. The cavity may grow unnoticed until it reaches the pulp of the tooth and causes severe pain. Often it is then too late to save the tooth.

Besides cavities, x-rays can detect such conditions as abscessed teeth, extra teeth, signs of periodontal disease and other diseases of the gum and bone structure, large and crooked roots and broken and retained root tips.

Your dentist may want to take complete x-ray pictures of your mouth. How often he does this will vary with your particular oral health condition. He has been trained to take your x-rays with maximum safety to you, and the amount of radiation from dental x-rays reaching the more sensitive cells of your body is less than that you receive from natural sources such as cosmic rays or the natural radiation in other materials.

Even before the dentist uses x-rays, the first thing he will do will be to give your teeth and mouth a general inspection. He will check for decay, abnormal wear, loose teeth, the way your teeth meet (occlusion) and any diseases of the soft tissue. He will look for signs of improper chewing habits.

One of the routine tasks for the dentist or his hygienist will be to clean the stains and mineralized deposits, called calculus or tartar, off the teeth. For many people this professional cleaning must be done about every six months, although the need varies with the individual.

In some of the dentist's activities, such as cleaning teeth and removing decay, he is aided by a handpiece, a modern instrument capable of 30,000 to 250,000 revolutions per minute. It enables him to complete in seconds procedures like decay removal that used to take minutes. The handpiece is also equipped with water or air to cool the teeth.

(Next article: "Reducing Dental Costs")