

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. 17—Endodontic Treatment

Endodontics may be a tongue-twister word, but for a growing number of people it has meant that their diseased or injured teeth may be saved.

Endodontic therapy is sometimes called root canal therapy or nerve or pulp therapy. Literally, it means working inside the tooth.

Treatments of this type are very common today in general dental practice, but there also is a growing number of dentists who limit their practices to just endodontics as a specialty.

A tooth has three primary parts. Outermost is the hard enamel covering. Inside this is the softer dentin. And at the core is the pulp, a soft tissue that contains the delicate blood vessels and nerve fibers of the tooth.

The two usual causes of tooth pulp damage are accidents and decay. The typical toothache arises when the decay process has penetrated through the tooth to the nerves in the pulp.

The bacteria that cause decay can infect the pulp, and the infection can then spread through the pulpal canal in the tooth's root.

In the past, when decay reached the pulp, the tooth was extracted. Now, a dentist can clean the disease from the cavity and cap it with a protective paste. This gives the exposed pulp a chance to heal itself just like any other part of the body. In a month or two, if the pulp has healed, the dentist will put in a permanent filling.

If bacterial infection has spread to the pulp, the dentist will have to remove the diseased portion. Medication can then be

placed inside the tooth to ensure the destruction of any remaining bacteria, and the chamber sealed with a filling.

In severe cases where the entire pulp is diseased or destroyed, the dentist will remove all of the pulp. The hollow channel is cleaned, sterilized and filled with an inert substance.

Even if all the nerves and blood vessels inside the tooth must be removed, the tooth is not necessarily dead. It can still receive nourishment from the tiny fibers that attach the root to the surrounding soft tissues and bone of the jaw.

If a tooth should turn gray after its pulp has been damaged, this too can be remedied through endodontic therapy. A simple bleaching process on the inside after root canal therapy can return the tooth to its natural color.

Accidents are also a common cause of pulp damage, the most frequent types being mouth injuries occurring in automobile accidents, organized sports and playground activities.

If the crown of a tooth is fractured so that the pulp is exposed, it can be restored by pulpal or root canal therapy and a cap or crown of esthetic materials. A broken root can be repaired with a splint with or without root canal therapy.

Occasionally a tooth is knocked out completely. Even it can be reimplanted if you act quickly. Wrap the tooth in a damp towel, do not clean it and rush it and the patient to a dentist. Minutes are important here.

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(Next article: "Why and When Some Teeth Have To Be Replaced")