

Take bite out of injury

Mouth guard important to prevent dental problems

By Walt Frank

March 30, 2008

Traumatic dental injuries and knocked-out teeth most often are associated with football or hockey, but spring sports, such as soccer and baseball, can present just as big of a risk.

With the spring sports season in full swing, members of the American Association of Endodontists are not necessarily looking for more business. Their focus is on saving teeth.

“Research has shown that without a mouth guard, a person is more than 60 times more likely to experience dental trauma if he or she participates in a high-impact sport such as soccer, basketball and even baseball,” said Dr. Clara Spatafore, secretary of the Chicago-based AAE.

That is why the association is encouraging sports participants — young and old — to wear mouth guards.

The AAE is comprised of about 7,100 members worldwide, including about 3,500 in the United States.

“The AAE needs all of organized dentistry’s help in ensuring athletes, coaches and parents know that mouth guard use is imperative for all sports, even those not commonly thought of as being hazardous,” said Dr. Shepard S. Goldstein, AAE president.

While dentists perform root canal therapy, endodontists have specialized training in root canal therapy and surgery.

A root canal saves a tooth by removing the pulp — the soft inner tissue containing nerves and blood vessels — that has been damaged, usually by deep decay. The endodontist cleans, fills and seals the canal, and the tooth is then restored with a permanent filling or other restoration.

“General dentists perform minor endodontics, but they don’t always have the time to do root canal procedures or don’t want to take that time from their patients to do it,” said Dr. Andrew Michanowicz, 920 Penn St., Hollidaysburg.

Michanowicz is the only endodontist in the Altoona area.

“The goal is to save the tooth so it will not be extracted,” he said.

Michanowicz performs about 35 root canals a week and receives many of his patients through referrals from general dentists.

He said root canal surgery saves about 16 million teeth annually.

A survey conducted by the AAE showed that patients who have had a root canal performed by an endodontist are six times more likely to describe it as painless than those people who have not had root canal treatment.

“With our technique today, they can be pain-free. That is our goal: to be pain-free. We use a local anesthetic or nitrous oxide, a colorless, odorless gas that puts you in a state to relieve your anxieties and fears,” said Michanowicz, who comes from a family of endodontists.

His father, Dr. Andrew E. Michanowicz, and his uncle, Dr. John Michanowicz, continue to practice in Pittsburgh.

His father also served as chairman of the Graduate Endodontics Department at the University of Pittsburgh for 32 years.

“My father had a big influence on me,” he said. “I wanted to follow in his footsteps.”