

Dentists catch more than cavities

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Most people should take their teeth to their grave unless they are afraid to visit the dentist. Those are the folks often mumbling something about dentists pulling teeth with rusty pliers.

But a routine visit is not just a chance for you to get your teeth cleaned but for a dentist to spot potential health issues.

It was a dentist, after all, who during a routine visit found a growth on UNC football coach Butch Davis' gum. The growth was removed and diagnosed as non-Hodgkin's lymphoma.

So why do so many people avoid dentists?

Well, who really wants to be prodded and poked? Also, for some people, the sound of the drill is annoying and conjures up images of something painful -- an experience that must be avoided. Then, there's the cost.

Dr. John Williams, dean of the school of dentistry at UNC-Chapel Hill, says he also is aware that some people may have had a painful experience with their teeth during childhood and developed a fear or phobia of dentistry. But, Williams says, modern dentistry is virtually pain free. Many dentists, he says, talk to their patients through the different processes in an effort to ease the patients' fears. They might use a mirror to show them what needs to be done. In some cases, medication is offered to help patients through a procedure.

Still, Williams cautions that the earlier you diagnose any abnormality in your mouth, the better your outcome.

Whether it's a bump on your tongue, a hole in your tooth or a red spot on your gum, it's better to deal with the problem immediately than put it off. "You can avoid pain and higher costs," he says, by taking care of your mouth.

Historically, dentistry has been dedicated to prevention. But, Williams says, "small things, if not treated, grow into big things."

In February, a 12-year-old Maryland boy died when an infected tooth went untreated. Deamonte Driver died of a brain infection brought on by an abscessed tooth, according to The Washington Post.

A simple tooth extraction might have saved Deamonte from undergoing two surgeries and six weeks of hospital care and eventual death, the story suggested. A routine tooth extraction normally costs \$80. The seventh-grader's surgery and hospital care totaled in the six figures.

In Deamonte's case, his family didn't have the money and couldn't find a dentist to take Medicaid.

But Mike Halim, a 61-year-old Raleigh resident with six tooth implants, said he didn't go to the dentist as a young man because, "I didn't feel like there was anything to go for ... when you're young, you're strong. As you age, they start going bad."

Not exactly.

Williams says teeth start going bad when they are not taken care of. At least twice a year, you should have a cleaning, which also includes a visual inspection of your mouth. And most dentists insist on X-rays every few visits.

During routine visits, dentists are checking for anything unusual on the gum, Williams says. And often X-rays provide clues to other diseases.

For example, often a person may be losing bone around the teeth. Williams says that could be a sign of diabetes.

"You can see on the X-ray calcification in arteries to the head, a sign of hardening of the arteries," he says.

"We have better diagnostic X-ray equipment today," he says. So dentistry is not just about sparkling whites, it's a way to safeguard your general health.

John S. Olmsted of Greensboro, president of the American Association of Endodontists, says it only takes six months for decay to go through the enamel, the outer covering of the tooth. Endodontists specialize in root canals. Olmsted says decay can then spread to the dentin, the middle layer of the tooth, and eventually to the nerve, which can cause you to lose your natural teeth.

Olmsted says the two main reasons people need root canals is decay and trauma to a tooth. If you do need a root canal, he stressed, it's a way of preserving your natural teeth. Often people associate it with pain, but the real pain is a tooth that is sensitive to cold and hot foods and beverages.

The dentists stress preventive measures such as having children who participate in sports wear mouth guards to protect their teeth, regular brushing and flossing, and, of course, those routine dental visits.

But Halim, a man set in his ways, will go to the dentist only for pain or "once a year" for a cleaning.

Bailey Rider, a 16-year-old Raleigh resident, goes routinely because her parents make her. She didn't like it at first, she says. It was the dentist prodding in her mouth that bothered her. "It wasn't as bad as I thought," she says, flashing a beautiful smile.

Davis is thankful he didn't miss his routine appointment. In an e-mailed statement, he says, "I highly recommend to everyone, adults and children, to visit the dentist regularly. I have done so my entire adult life and as recommended by the dentist when I was a kid. It's an important part of your overall health and I encourage others to go regularly."