



12 NOV, 2024

## Your dentist, your friend

The Sun, Malaysia

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➤ Aversion to dental check-ups is common but avoiding them can lead to lifetime of poor oral health

**E**VERYONE knows they should get their teeth checked at least once a year but how many actually do it? After all, if the teeth does not hurt, there is really no need for a dental check, right?

Sadly, too many people feel this way, which allows small problems to escalate into bigger issues. By the time most adults drag their feet to the dentists, they are in considerable pain or having functional issues and the problem requires more extensive corrective action, which usually results in more pain and higher costs.

Besides dental decay, gum disease is also prevalent among adults as well as older persons, leading to loosening of teeth and eventual tooth loss. This further reinforces the perception that visits to the dentists are usually painful and unpleasant.

Among babies and young children, early childhood caries is common and so is tooth decay in older children and teenagers, who are more likely to consume processed foods, sugary snacks and drinks. These, especially with frequent snacking that increases acid production in the mouth, all contribute to tooth decay. Early childhood caries remains a major challenge among the five to six-year-olds in Malaysia.

Here is how to turn things around:

### Get an early start

Children start to develop teeth from around six months of age and parents should start to familiarise them with dental visits by the time they turn a year old. There are several reasons for this:

- Young children are unable to communicate to us if they are experiencing tooth or gum aches. When they fuss and cry, the more common thought is that they are hungry or colicky. Parents may not relate this behaviour

with tooth or gum pain and would not think to check inside their mouths. This may lead to unnecessary suffering for the child and allow the problem to worsen.

- When dental visits are routine and familiar, this allows dentists to reinforce with parents the proper care that is required to maintain the health of their children's teeth and gums. This allows early detection of any possible problems and early intervention could save the child a lot of pain, discomfort and other related problems. As the child grows older, parents are advised to make use of the dental services available at schools for regular checks and updates on their child's oral health.

### Be proactive

For adults, it is never too late to begin the journey to better oral health. If you have always shied away from dental checkups, try bringing a friend along for support or plan for a small treat afterward to help turn a dental visit into something you can look forward to.

Adults need to be more proactive with checkups as lifestyle habits, chronic conditions and other factors are more likely to have an impact on oral health and may require more frequent visits. These include:

- Smoking, which reduces blood supply to the gums. This aggravates gum problems and makes subsequent loss of teeth more common among smokers.
- Diabetes, which impacts healing ability. Individuals with diabetes are more likely to have poor gum health. Meanwhile, good gum health has been shown to be related to better sugar control in diabetic patients.
- Cardiovascular disease as evidence from epidemiological studies indicate a positive association between gum disease (periodontitis) and coronary heart disease.

Research shows a close association between chronic infections and gum inflammatory reaction in periodontitis, with significantly higher risks of adverse cardiovascular events.

- Taking calcium channel blockers, a common drug for hypertension, which carries a risk of developing overgrowth of gums known as gingival hyperplasia. This can make it harder to floss and brush effectively, allowing food particles to get trapped that can contribute to tooth decay and gum disease.

- Radiotherapy treatment, when used to treat cancers of the head and neck, affects the saliva glands. Saliva contains calcium and calcium carbonate to buffer the effects of acids that are produced by bacteria. As a result, with reduced saliva production, there is less protection against erosion and teeth are more prone to decay.

- Taking multiple treatments for different ailments and increasing age can contribute to reduced saliva production.

A good dentist-patient relationship goes a long way in helping people feel at ease. This can make the overall experience more pleasant so that patients are more likely to go for regular checkups. However, it takes time for trust to develop.

It is important to find a dentist who you can trust and are comfortable with. Over time, through regular conversation and education, patients' fears and concerns can be addressed, making them more receptive to guidance. Parents are advised to act as role models for their children and work to overcome any personal trauma that prevents you and your child from getting regular dental checkups.

Tooth decay and gum disease do not develop overnight. In its early stages, tooth decay and gum problems are reversible. By being proactive, you can help to reverse the disease pattern, begin your journey to better oral health and subsequently better general health.

*This article is contributed by IMU University School of Dentistry dean Prof Seow Liang Lin.*



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### SUMMARIES

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