

ROOT CARIES: A GUIDE FOR PATIENTS

What is root caries? (root decay)

Unlike the type of decay you are probably familiar with that occurs in the top (crown) of the tooth, root caries occurs where the gums have receded (shrunk) away, to expose the root of the tooth.

What causes root caries?

Like all tooth decay, root caries is caused by bacteria. Bacteria can cling to your teeth to form a sticky, colorless film called plaque. This plaque can lead to tooth decay. Unlike the crown of the tooth that is covered by enamel, the root is made of dentin which decays much easier. Changes in the amount of saliva in your mouth can also put you at increased risk for developing caries. Saliva contains many chemicals that keep your teeth and mouth healthy. Many medications, chemotherapy, radiation treatments, and some diseases can cause your glands not to make enough saliva, and therefore make cavities and other mouth problems more likely to occur. A person has to lose about 50% of saliva production before it will be noticed.

How do I know if I have root caries?

Many people that have root caries do not know it because it occurs at or below the gum line. In addition, as we age our teeth become less sensitive and may not warn us that the tooth is damaged. Often root caries is first found by a dentist or dental hygienist, during a professional cleaning or exam when they can feel the softened root with a dental instrument. Radiographs (x-rays) can be helpful in finding root caries between the teeth.

What can be done to repair the damage to the root?

Root caries is very deceptive because the damage is to the foundation of the tooth. A little damage can weaken the entire tooth and put it at risk for breaking off at the gum line. What appears to be a small amount of damage to the tooth may require a crown instead of a filling. Damage may have gone all the way into the pulp (inside) of the tooth and may require endodontic therapy (root canal), to prevent pain and infection. At times, so much damage has been done that the tooth must be removed. That is why it is so important to have frequent exams so that root caries can be found early.

What can be done to prevent root caries?

Since root caries is caused from bacteria, the most important thing you can do is to keep your teeth clean every day. In addition to keeping your mouth clean, fluoride has been shown to be very important in the prevention of root caries. Depending on your needs, we will customize a fluoride treatment plan just for you. Sometimes different methods of fluoride delivery need to be used simultaneously, in order to combat high instances of caries. Your diet is also a very important factor because certain foods and snacks can feed the bacteria that form in the decay, causing plaque. Finally, frequent professional cleanings and exams can help prevent root caries or find it early when it can be more easily repaired. We are here to help you keep your teeth for your lifetime!