

But it doesn't hurt!

“But doctor, I haven't had anything hurting at all! How can I have a problem?” This is a very common comment I hear when doing diagnosis on patients. Most new patients have postponed their visit to the dentist because their perception is that if they had any problems of any significance, they would know. The truth, however, is that most dental problems do not begin to hurt until they are severe, difficult to treat issues. Often, even severe problems don't cause enough discomfort for patients to notice.

Waiting until it hurts is a very bad idea. Imagine you have a beautiful new car, but no one ever takes it in for an oil change or tune up. Oil changes are just money and time you don't have. Seems like a waste! No one airs up the tires, puts in transmission fluid, or any of the other mysterious things the mechanics do while under the hood. You just keep putting it off and driving the car as long as it runs. It's still moving, right? So everything must be ok. One day, however, the lack of care catches up with you. Late at night while traveling in an unfamiliar area, the engine starts to smoke and the car quits running. You end up on the side of the road, waiting for a tow truck, and facing an expense ten times that of a few oil changes, and a major hassle to boot. I know a lot of people who treat their healthcare the very same way. They take much better care of their “stuff” than they do themselves.

There are two main reasons people avoid going to the dentist: money and fear. Some people put off a visit until they are miserable and cannot wait any longer. By then, the problem is major, the treatment is much more involved, and the expense is higher. They have an overall bad experience (purely because they waited), and so they avoid going again until they are miserable. This is a very dangerous cycle. A simple exam and hygiene appointment can allow your dentist to find problems that may arise when they are extremely small, and therefore easy and inexpensive to treat. Waiting until an area hurts usually means a much bigger problem; more expensive and more difficult on the patient and the doctor.

Most patients are quite unaware of the active dental problems they may have. Usually, cavities do not cause any pain until they are quite deep and near the nerve of the tooth. Sometimes, the nerve of the tooth can even die and cause an infection without ever hurting at all. As long as the infection drains, usually right out into your mouth (yuk!), and does not build up pressure, you may never know it. Periodontal or gum disease, which is directly related to heart disease, heart attacks, stroke, diabetes, lung infections, and preterm, low birth weight babies, as well as loss of teeth and other dental problems, often does not cause any discomfort at all. Oral cancer, which kills more Americans every year than cervical cancer or skin cancer, about one person an hour, is more often than not completely without symptoms until it is almost too far gone to treat. Simply put, you cannot afford to not be regularly examined.

Several new technologies make detection of problems easier and earlier than ever. Laser light screening of teeth with a new instrument called the Diagnodent can find decay so early in formation that it can often be treated without the need for numbing. In other word, **NO SHOTS NEEDED** for these small lesions. The use of low radiation digital x-rays is safer than conventional and yields pictures that may be magnified, darkened, lightened, or otherwise manipulated to see things that may have been missed otherwise. The use of intraoral cameras allow the patient and doctor to view the mouth together on a television monitor, allowing the patient to see for themselves things they may not be aware of in their mouths. As for oral cancers, questionable areas can now simply be swabbed and sent to be scanned by a special computer system to look for irregular cells, as opposed to requiring the patient to undergo a surgical biopsy. All of these innovations make diagnosis easier and more thorough than ever before.

Your health and wellbeing are the most critical things affecting the quality of your life. A little maintenance and checkup on a regular basis is critical to avoiding major problems, expenses, and pain! Diagnosing dental problems early can make the whole experience easy and inexpensive. And while you're at it, change the oil in your car...

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