

Tooth Talk

“Hey Doc, my tooth does not hurt!! Do I still need to fix the cavity in that tooth?”

Tooth decay (or dental caries), one of the world's oldest and most widespread diseases, is an infectious disease process that causes damage to the tooth structure. It is the 2nd leading cause of tooth loss, behind gum disease. Cavities(holes) are the most noticeable consequences of tooth decay.

Teeth are composed of an outer covering of non-living “enamel”(the hardest substance in the body) which is a highly mineralized and crystalline structure, composed mainly of calcium and phosphate. Under the enamel is an inner core of living “dentin” which has a consistency and composition similar to bone. Protected by enamel and dentin is the “pulp”, the nerve tissue residing in the middle of teeth.

The oral environment is loaded with bacteria. Certain bacteria have the potential to cause decay. When sugar or carbohydrates are eaten, these bacteria have the ability of breaking down sugar to use for their own metabolism and living. In the process, they produce acid which dissolves enamel and dentin.

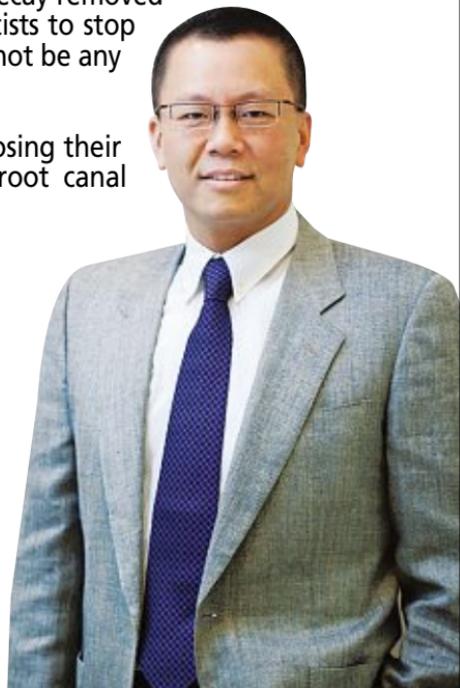
When tooth decay is at its earliest stage, only the enamel is being damaged and there is usually no pain involved. If the amount of sugar in the diet is reduced and the proper oral hygiene is performed on a daily basis, the disease process quite often will stop and there is no need for a filling.

However, if tooth decay progresses into the dentin, it can spread quickly inside the teeth towards the pulp. At this stage, patients may still not have any pain/discomfort or may only have slight sensitivity to hot/cold/sweet.

If decay has reached the dentin but still left untreated, the disease process will continue and will ultimately reach the pulp, causing pain, tooth loss, or, in rare cases, death. When the pulp is involved, the only option to save the teeth will be to perform root canal therapy which involves the removal of the diseased nerve tissue inside the teeth.

Therefore, in summary, if tooth decay is only limited to the enamel, there is no need for any repair work. However, if tooth decay is into the dentin, it would only be in the best interest of the patients to have the decay removed and fillings placed into the teeth by the dentists to stop the disease progress, even though there may not be any pain with the decayed teeth at that moment.

Otherwise, patients will likely be looking at losing their teeth or incurring additional expenses for root canal treatment in order to save their teeth!!



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