

SAVING YOUR SMILE

Prevention saves time, money and teeth

By Norm and Melanie DeJong
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Let's save our teeth! Prevention is cost effective, and flossing and brushing may be the best dental insurance available. Preventive professional cleanings and checkups, daily flossing and brushing will save you time, money and your teeth.

Better oral health may mean better overall health

Improper oral care may lead to plaque buildup, and plaque formation may lead to gingivitis, which may progress to periodontitis, a more severe form of gum disease.

Recent evidence suggests periodontitis may be associated with heart disease, diabetes and other health conditions.

A few things in your mouth:

Saliva: Your mouth and teeth are constantly bathed in saliva. Although we never give much thought to our spit, this simple fluid is remarkable for what it does to help protect our oral health. Saliva keeps teeth and other oral tissues moist and lubricated, washes away some of the food particles left behind after we eat, and it lowers the acid levels in the mouth. It also protects against some viruses and bacteria. A moist mouth is important. Dry mouth leads to tooth decay.

Plaque: Plaque appears as a soft, gooey substance that sticks to the teeth a bit like jam sticks to a spoon. It is, in fact, colonies of bacteria, protozoa, mycoplasmas, yeasts and viruses clumping together in a gel-like organic material. Also in the mix are bacteria byproducts, white blood cells, food debris and body tissue. Plaque grows when bacteria attach to the tooth and begin multiplying. Plaque starts forming immediately after a tooth is cleaned; it takes about an hour for plaque to build up to measurable levels. As time goes on, different types of microorganisms appear, and the plaque thickens.

Calculus or tartar: If not removed, plaque begins to mineralize and harden into calculus, or tartar, because the plaque absorbs calcium, phosphorus and other miner-



Contributed photo

Melanie and Norm DeJong stand outside their dental practice on West Front Street in Prairie City.

als from saliva. These minerals form crystals and harden. New plaque forms on top of existing calculus, and the next layer can also become calcified; then the cycle continues. If calculus is not removed, your gum will back away or recede or retreat from the bacteria-laden calculus, and gum disease is the result.

Bacteria: We have many different strains of bacteria in our mouths. Some bacteria are good; they help control destructive bacteria. When it comes to decay, *Streptococcus mutans* is the bacterial strain that does the most damage. It attaches easily to teeth and produces acid that can cause tooth decay or gum disease.

Types of tooth decay: Bacteria are invisible troublemakers.

Tooth decay, also known as dental caries, breaks into the tooth. A white spot appears first on the enamel where the tooth is starting to weaken. At this stage, the tooth can repair the weakened area with the help of fluoride and minerals in saliva. If the decay continues and breaks through the enamel's surface, the damage is permanent. The decay must be cleaned out and the cavity filled by a dentist. Untreated decay will worsen and destroy a tooth all the way through the enamel to the inside dentin lay-

er and down to the pulp, or tooth's nerve.

Baby teeth recently emerged have weak enamel and are highly susceptible to acid deterioration or decay. Baby bottle tooth decay, or early childhood caries, destroys enamel quickly. If milk from a bottle or nursing is not swallowed and leaves a white milk line across the lips and teeth of a baby, the enzymes in the saliva and acidity from the bacteria start breaking down the enamel. Babies that fall asleep with a bottle or while nursing before that last swallow is taken have more chances of tooth decay. When baby teeth appear is the time to make sure the child's teeth are clean of plaque.

Preventing tooth decay is a lifelong endeavor.

Root surfaces are also vulnerable to decay in older adults with recession from gum disease or hard brushing. Dry mouth makes one prone to root surface decay. Dry mouth is often caused by some common medicines. Be aware and always keep your mouth moist. Talk to your dentist, medical doctor and pharmacist about dry mouth.

And remember to brush and floss daily to protect your smile.

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