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Q & A

Why treat cavities in baby teeth when they will be replaced by new ones?

Although all baby teeth are replaced by permanent teeth, this must happen at the right age. If a baby tooth is lost much earlier than the scheduled time of eruption of its successor, it is possible that the space created by the loss of the baby tooth will reduce or even close due to drifting of nearby teeth. This may result in poorly aligned permanent teeth. Also unchecked dental decay can result in abscess formation under the affected tooth which is not good for the health of the child.

What are fissure sealants?

The top surfaces of the teeth are not smooth and flat but crossed with tiny hills and valleys called 'pits' and 'fissures'. These are places where, typically, a toothbrush cannot reach and so plaque is allowed to form and accumulate. One method of preventing cavities from developing in these pits and fissures is to seal them off with a pit and fissure sealant.

The procedure is as follows: First the tooth is cleaned, then the surface of the tooth to be treated is 'etched' with a special solution which helps the sealant to stick. Once the tooth is clean and dried, the sealant is applied and a light is used to cure the sealant hard. It is difficult to predict how long a sealant should last; 3-5 years would be considered a success but any period of time in which the tooth remains protected is beneficial.

At what age do the permanent teeth erupt?

The first permanent teeth to erupt are usually the lower incisors and back molars. Parents are often surprised to be told that the first permanent molar is indeed an adult tooth as these teeth do not replace baby teeth but simply erupt unannounced at the back of the mouth. The first molar is a very important tooth. The remaining primary (baby or 'milk') teeth are lost between the ages of 7-12 years; all the permanent teeth should have erupted by the age of 14 years with the exception of the wisdom teeth, which normally

erupt between 18-25 years. The period in which both milk teeth and permanent teeth are present is termed the 'mixed dentition' stage.

What are the early symptoms of orthodontic problems?

Determining treatment need is not easy but there are some signs that may help in prompting you to seek professional advice. Look at your child's teeth. Are there overlapping teeth or large spaces? Ask your child to bite down. Do the top teeth protrude? Do the top teeth cover more than 50% of the bottom teeth. These may be indicators for treatment. Look at the alignment of the jaws. Does the jaw shift to one side? These are just some of the signs that MAY indicate a need for orthodontic assessment but professional advice should always be sought.

At what age should an orthodontist be seen?

There is no 'best' or specific time when such an opinion should be sought. Your dentist will be continually monitoring your child's orthodontic development and will know the optimum time to refer for a specialist orthodontic evaluation if necessary. It is not always easy for the 'lay' person to determine if treatment is necessary because orthodontic problems can occur even though the front teeth look straight. Also, there are some perfectly normal developmental features that look out of place - for example, spacing - but which will resolve on their own.



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