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Episode 25: Dental Cavity Prevention Plan for You and Your Family?

Are you aware that you can prevent tooth decay? What if I were to tell you that it only takes a few minutes a day to significantly decrease your risk of getting a cavity or even eliminate it? Find out more in today's episode of This Old Tooth.

Hello, everyone! You are listening to Episode number 25 of This Old Tooth. A podcast devoted to providing you with honest agenda-free information about how you can get and keep a beautiful, healthy smile for life. I am your host, Dr. Lisa Germain.

In today's episode, I will discuss a cavity prevention plan for you and your family that is guaranteed to keep you smiling.

Dental caries or cavities, more commonly known as tooth decay, are caused by a breakdown of the tooth enamel, which is the hard outer layer of the tooth.

Although dental caries are largely preventable, they remain the most common chronic disease of children aged 6 to 11 years and adolescents aged 12 to 19 years. But adults are also susceptible to this disease, particularly since the decrease in saliva as we age can cause erosion and cavities on the surface of the tooth near the gum. One in four American adults have untreated tooth decay. And to give you some perspective, that is the equivalent of 2.5 million people in the state of Illinois alone.

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Part of the problem is that there is a huge misconception that tooth decay is associated with pain. However, by the time a patient has pain, a simple filling is usually not the solution to the problem. And many require extensive work involving root canals, full coverage crowns or caps and sometimes extraction of the tooth and a dental implant.

Dental decay is an infectious disease and so prevalent that it is second only to the common cold. In Episode #5 of This Old Tooth, I discussed how you can actually get it if you kiss someone who has an active cavity. But the main causes of tooth decay include bacteria in your mouth, frequent snacking, sipping sugary drinks and not cleaning your teeth well. The bacteria feed on the sugar and other carbohydrates that then produce acid as a waste product that accumulate on your tooth in a biofilm layer called plaque. It is these acids that destroy the protective tooth enamel as well as a dentin layer underneath it. If not halted or reversed, a cavity will form.

A cavity causes permanent damage. And while they can be filled with man-made materials, preventing them is preferable. My goal today is to present a scientific evidence based approach to cavity prevention for you and your family. With the New Year coming up, I hope this becomes one of your resolutions for 2020, but it is never too late to start this program.

The first step in this plan is to see your dentist, to evaluate your risk level, for getting dental decay. To do this, many dentists will use the evidence based caries management by risk assessment or CAMBRA scale. This tool takes actual information gathered from each patient individually through a thorough oral examination, history and radiology. Once your dentist has established what your risk level is ahead of time, they can tailor treatments and educate you in ways that best serve your individual needs. In addition, the focus is to catch the problem at its earliest stage. While we are always going to be at some risk for cavities because the assets are produced by food and drink, the goal is to decrease your risk level to the lowest possible. The CAMBRA scale uses four different levels. They range from low to extreme and each level will come with a set of recommendations that are tailored for your specific needs. Your dentist may use a completely different scale, but at each appointment, they will evaluate the results of their recommendations and re-tailor your plan based on your improvement over time. In addition, your dentist will provide recommendations on related conditions such as dry mouth and helpful information about risk factors such as smoking and diabetes. They may also advise you about possible obstacles at home getting in the way of good oral care and ways to overcome them.

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Now, during that same exam, you can ask your dentist the following questions:

1. What toothpaste do you recommend for my mouth?
2. Do I need additional fluoride treatments?
3. Should I be using an electric toothbrush?
4. What kind of floss is best for my teeth?
5. Show me what areas I'm missing when I brush and floss.
6. Are my gums healthy?

And at that visit, it might be a good idea to have them review or even have the hygienist review with you proper brushing and flossing techniques. Because my second tip in the cavity prevention plan is to make sure you are brushing and flossing your teeth the correct way.

When you were growing up, your parents probably said, go brush your teeth. But did anybody really show you how? In truth, did anybody really show them how? Did anybody really ever tell you why it was important? And in flossing is a completely different skill set. There is no way that you can do either one of these things without proper instruction.

Brushing and flossing your teeth is one of the simplest yet most effective ways to prevent cavities. The recommended minimum for self-care oral hygiene is to brush twice a day for two minutes at each session and to floss once a day. So if you just invest five minutes a day, you can give yourself the biggest advantage to prevent tooth decay.

My third tip is if at that dental visit you do find that you have active decay, have it removed and repaired. You want to begin this cavity prevention plan with a disease free mouth.

My fourth tip is to cut back on sugary sweets and sugary drinks. And if you do indulge in those, please brush your teeth right away because you don't want your teeth to have a prolonged sugar bath.

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My fifth tip to help prevent cavities is to drink more water. In addition to all of the health benefits from staying hydrated, water will wash away the bacteria and ultimately decrease the acid production in your mouth. And drinking water with fluoride is one of the easiest and most beneficial things you can do to help prevent cavities. It is never too late to start a new healthy habit. Why? Because at any age we all want to have a good quality of life. And it's never too late to prevent future oral health problems. Our mouth health is constantly changing because of what we eat changes in our health and how well we take care of our teeth and gums. But the most important thing to remember is that preventing cavities is in your hands.

And now for a fun fact!

You know that feeling you get when you burn your mouth with hot food? It actually has a name. It's called Pizza Palate. Also speaking of pizza, the cheese is actually healthy for your teeth since it contains calcium and phosphorus. Cheese can also reduce the pH level in plaque and can help remineralize enamel.

For the next three weeks, I'll be replaying my most popular episodes while I plan season two for my podcast. So tune in next Thursday to find out whether flossing your teeth is really necessary. And if you missed my special Christmas episode, please listen to it. It is Episode #24 where I recite the children's book that I wrote about what would happen if Santa Claus got a toothache on Christmas Eve. You can sign up on my website to enter to win a free copy of my book. I am so very proud of it.

Until next time. Thank you for listening. And remember, "be true to your teeth or they will be false to you".

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