

Talking with Patients

Root Caries

André V. Ritter, DDS, MS

WHAT IS IT?

Root caries is a cavity located on the root surface of a tooth, usually close to or below the gumline. Root caries has become an important dental problem because people are living longer and keeping their teeth longer. As patients grow older, their gums recede and root surfaces are exposed, making them more susceptible to root caries.

Root caries is not exclusive to older individuals. Any caries-prone patient having gum recession can develop root caries. However, the elderly are usually more vulnerable to root caries because of several conditions. First, older patients are more likely to experience gum recession. Gum recession exposes the root of the tooth, which is softer than the enamel-covered crown of the tooth. Consequently, this area is more likely to develop decay.

Second, many older patients use medications that reduce saliva flow and cause them to have a dry mouth. The constant flow of saliva is extremely important to “flush” the mouth and reduce the effects of acids produced by bacteria in dental plaque. To avoid the “dry mouth” feeling, elderly patients with reduced salivary flow frequently resort to sucking lemon drops and other candies. This habit is very

destructive, since the sugar contained in such candies can contribute to the occurrence of root caries.

Finally, many aging patients lose their ability to effectively brush and floss their teeth, because of arthritis or other problems. This allows dental plaque to build up and can quickly lead to root caries.

HOW IS IT DIAGNOSED, TREATED, AND PREVENTED?

Root caries can be diagnosed by a dentist during regular dental examinations. X-rays are also helpful to diagnose root caries, particularly when they occur between back teeth.

Treatment of root caries generally requires the placement of a filling or crown. Some filling materials even release fluoride to help prevent future root decay.

Prevention of root caries includes steps for effectively removing plaque, stimulating saliva flow, and making root surfaces more resistant to caries through repeated fluoride application. The use of an electric toothbrush is helpful for older patients whose manual dexterity is compromised. Xylitol- or sorbitol-containing chewing gums or lozenges (sugar free) can be used to stimulate saliva flow and reduce dry mouth, helping prevent root

caries. Finally, fluoride-containing toothpastes and fluoride varnishes applied by your dentist are effective in preventing root caries. These fluoride-containing materials make the root surfaces harder and more resistant to decay.

CONCLUSIONS

Root caries is an ever-increasing problem predominantly occurring in older patients. Root caries can be restored similarly to other cavities. More importantly, root caries can be prevented by proper oral hygiene habits, proper diet, and regular visits to the dentist.

The following photograph shows an example of a root caries defect.



Figures 1 and 2.