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Oral Hygiene

Good oral hygiene is important for your health. Problems inside your mouth can be painful and cause serious health consequences if left untreated. In the U.S., it is a social expectation to have clean teeth and pleasant smelling breath.

What causes dental problems?
Having bacteria in your mouth is normal, but you may have dental problems if bacteria builds up on your teeth and is not removed by practicing good oral care. Built-up bacteria becomes a whitish film called plaque, which produces acids that break down the enamel (the outer coating of your teeth). This leads to tooth decay and holes called cavities. A build-up of bacteria in your mouth or on your tongue also causes your breath to smell bad. When plaque is not removed, it hardens and becomes tartar, which makes it more difficult to keep your teeth clean. Excess plaque or tartar can cause gum disease. The early stage of gum disease is called gingivitis: gums become red, swollen and bleed, and teeth can be sensitive to hot and cold. Left untreated, gingivitis can lead to periodontitis, which can result in the loss of tissue and bone in your mouth.

Getting oral care
Many dental problems are preventable and treatable. In the U.S., it is recommended that everyone get their teeth professionally cleaned twice a year. During a dental cleaning, a hygienist will use special instruments to remove the plaque and tartar on your teeth. She will polish and floss your teeth and teach you proper home care. The hygienist may take x-rays of your teeth, and the dentist will also look at your teeth and mouth and recommend treatment. If you do have a cavity or other problem a follow-up appointment is needed. Cavities are treated with fillings. This means that the dentist will remove the decay from your tooth and fill the hole with a material to prevent the cavity from growing.

Preventing dental problems
You can prevent dental problems by following these guidelines:
• Brush your teeth twice a day with fluoride toothpaste for two minutes
• Use a soft bristle brush
• Floss between your teeth daily
• Avoid sugary and starchy snacks
• Avoid smoking and chewing tobacco
• Don’t pierce your lips or any part of your mouth
• Visit your dentist regularly

Oral hygiene for children
It is very important to help your children develop the habit of brushing their teeth twice a day at an early age. Healthy baby teeth will promote the growth of healthy adult teeth. Begin oral care as soon as your baby’s teeth appear, brushing with water only and a child-size toothbrush. When children reach the age of two, you can start using a pea-sized amount of fluoride toothpaste (be sure to teach them how to spit out the toothpaste). Floss daily when they have two teeth that touch. In the U.S., dental check-ups are often required in order for children to go to school. Talk to your doctor or caseworker to find out what the requirements are in your school district.

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