

TOOTH DECAY

What is tooth decay

Tooth decay, also known as dental caries occurs when bacteria in the mouth destroy the teeth. Dental plaque is the sticky white film of bacteria (germs) that constantly forms on all of our teeth. When we eat or drink the bacteria make acid from the sugars in our food, which then attacks the teeth. The more often you consume sugary foods/drinks, the more often the teeth will get attacked by acid. If the tooth continues to be attacked the tooth will get a cavity or hole.

How can you detect decay

Your dentist will usually be able to detect decay at regular check-ups. Early decay can present as white or brown spots. If the tooth has got a brown coloured hole, known as a cavity, it has progressed quite far and will need treatment. Dentists take x-rays to pick up decay in areas we find difficult to see, such as the sides of back teeth.

What can be done to prevent tooth decay

- Reduce frequency and amount of sugary foods and drinks (see diet advice sheet)
- Brush teeth thoroughly twice a day and use floss to remove the plaque
- Ensure you are using a fluoride containing toothpaste
- Use a fluoride containing mouthwash
- Fissure sealants-coatings on teeth with very deep grooves-applied by your dentist usually on children
- Ensure you visit your dentist regularly so they can detect decay

How can it be treated

The earlier we can detect and treat decay, the better, as leaving it will lead to more invasive treatment.

- Early decay-if it is very superficial, careful prevention alone with regular monitoring by the dentist can be successful-see factors mentioned above. In addition the dentist may apply fluoride gel on the tooth.
- Decay requiring fillings-if the decay extends deeper, it forms a cavity. The dentist will need to remove the decay and place a filling-metal or white. You will probably need to have your tooth made numb for this. The filling only replaces the lost tooth tissue - if you do not carry out preventative measures you can always get new decay around it. If the filling is very big it may need a crown or inlay to protect the tooth from breaking.
- Deep decay-where the decay or filling is very deep there is a risk that the nerve of the tooth can get damaged and cause pain-in this case you will need to have the nerve taken out and a root canal treatment (see information sheet) or the tooth taken out.