

# *Root Caries: A Guide for Patients*

Randy F. Huffines, D.D.S. © 2007

## *What is root caries?*

Tooth decay (caries) is not just a problem for children but can happen at any age. In fact, one type of caries becomes more common the older we get. It is called by several names: root caries, root decay, or root cavities, to name three. Unlike the type of decay you are probably familiar with that occurs in the top (crown) of the tooth, root caries occurs where the gums have receded (shrunk) away to expose the root of the tooth.

## *What causes root caries?*

Like all tooth decay, root caries is caused by bacteria. When your mouth is not kept clean, bacteria can cling to your teeth to form a sticky, colorless film called plaque. This plaque can lead to tooth decay. In addition, for root caries to occur, the root of the tooth must be exposed. Unlike the crown of the tooth that is covered by enamel, the root is made of dentin which decays much easier. Changes in the amount of saliva in your mouth can also put you at increased risk for developing caries. Saliva contains many chemicals that keep your teeth and mouth healthy. Many medications, chemotherapy, radiation treatments, and some diseases can cause your glands not to make enough saliva and therefore make cavities and other mouth problems more likely to occur.

## *How do I know if I have root caries?*

Many people that have root caries do not know it. Because it occurs at or even below the gum line, the warning signs that often accompany tooth decay, such as sensitivity to cold or sweets, may be absent. In addition, as we age our teeth become less sensitive and may not warn us that the tooth is damaged. Often root caries is first found by a dentist or dental hygienist during a professional cleaning or exam when they can feel the softened root with a dental instrument. Radiographs (x-rays) can be helpful in finding root caries between the teeth.

### ***What can be done to repair the damage to the tooth?***

Root caries is very deceptive. Even when the cavity can be seen with the eye, it often appears small and not very alarming. However, because the damage is to the foundation of the tooth, a little damage can weaken the entire tooth and put it at risk for breaking off to the gum line. To illustrate, perhaps you have seen a large tree that appeared to be healthy but fell down because it was rotten at the root. Similarly, what appears to be a small amount of damage to the tooth may require a crown instead of a filling. Damage may have gone all the way to the pulp (inside) of the tooth and may require endodontic therapy (root canal) to prevent pain and infection. At times, so much damage has been done the tooth must be removed. That is why it is so important to have frequent exams so that root caries can be found early.

### ***What can be done to prevent root caries?***

Since root caries is caused from bacteria, the most important thing you can do is to keep your teeth clean every day. If your gums have receded, cleaning can be more difficult. We are trained to develop a method customized for your specific condition that will allow you to be able to clean more thoroughly. Be sure to tell us if you have physical limitations that make it more difficult to clean your teeth. In addition to keeping your mouth clean, fluoride has been shown to be very important in the prevention of root caries. There are now many ways to be sure you receive the proper amount of fluoride depending on your unique needs, and we will customize a fluoride treatment plan just for you. Your diet is also a very important factor because certain foods and snacks can greatly increase the number of bacteria that forms the decay-causing plaque. Finally, frequent professional cleanings and exams can help prevent root caries or find it early when it can be more easily repaired. We are here to help you keep your teeth for a lifetime!