

Ask the Dentist

Dr. Deborah Petronio



Teeth Can Require More Care, Treatment as They Get Older

Q: I've always thought I had "good genes" with my teeth, but now that I am getting a bit older I notice they are becoming sensitive. Why is this?

A: You don't really think about it much, but teeth really take quite a pounding during our lifetime. It is not just the act of chewing that causes mechanical wear and tear, but the ever-present bacteria in our mouths that wage a constant tug-of-war against our saliva and immune system, which maintain the health of our teeth and gums.

Our teeth are in a constant state of back-and-forth demineralization (breaking down the tooth structure) and remineralization (building up the tooth structure). When acid levels at the surface of the tooth drop below a certain level, demineralization proceeds faster than remineralization, which means there is a net loss of mineral structure on the tooth's surface.

All this mechanical and chemical damage takes its toll as we get older, so that after the age of 50, even teeth that have always been healthy become prone to cracking. Those cracks then provide places where the bacteria can accumulate which makes the decay process faster.

Another common weak point is our gum lines.

Even with regular brushing and flossing it is difficult to maintain the right balance of bacteria in our mouths. Bacteria, when left on the teeth for too long, make

their way into the gums where they cause an infection called periodontal disease. This is a bacterial infection just like any other and if left untreated, will result in bleeding, sensitivity and, over time, may loosen your teeth and even get into your bloodstream.

Once the gum tissue is weakened it is much easier for bacteria to attack the tooth. Decay here (under the gum line) becomes serious quickly because it is much closer to the nerve. If cavities are not caught early, you may need a root canal to save the tooth.

So the message really is don't ignore those twinges and changes in sensitivity as just another sign of aging. It is possible that they are warning signs for cavities, periodontal disease, cracks and other damage to your teeth. And don't believe that your "good genes" will protect you forever. Speak to your dentist about changes that you need to make in your routines to preserve your teeth as long as possible. After all, research has shown that people who keep their own natural teeth can live up to 10 years longer than people without their teeth.

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