The Diagnostic Process

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For your dental health.

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The diagnosis of periodontal disease and cavities are two important parts of a dental examination.

How we diagnose periodontal disease

Since you may have periodontal disease without experiencing any symptoms, we perform a thorough examination using X-rays and a periodontal probe. Healthy gums fit tight against the teeth and have no pockets. When the bone levels fall as a result of periodontal disease, the gums pull away from the teeth and form pockets. We measure the depth of any pockets with a periodontal probe. The probe measures the distance from the bottom of the pocket, where the gum is attached to the tooth, to the top of the gums. In general, the deeper the pockets, the greater the extent of periodontal disease.

Periodontal probing

We also examine the color, shape, and overall condition of the gums. Bleeding is a sign of infection; healthy gums don't bleed. Healthy gums are firm and lightly stippled. In moderate cases of periodontal disease, we see red and swollen gums.

Bone loss is permanent

X-rays tell us a lot about periodontal disease. In a healthy mouth, the bone comes up high around the necks of the teeth, and the bone level is even throughout the mouth. With advanced periodontal disease, the bone levels are much lower and are uneven.

We look for the following signs to diagnose periodontal disease:

- probe readings greater than three millimeters
- bleeding upon probing
- swollen and red gums, especially between the teeth
- bone loss or tartar buildup indicated by X-rays

How we diagnose decay

Periodontal disease is caused by the accumulation of plaque. The bacteria in plaque also produce acid that destroys the enamel of your teeth and causes cavities. To find cavities, we perform a visual examination and take X-rays. Using a dental explorer, we check the tops and sides of your teeth for surface cavities. To look for cavities between teeth, we use X-rays.

It's far better to diagnose and repair cavities early, while they're still small and isolated in the enamel layer of the tooth. Once they've spread to the softer dentin layer, they grow far more quickly and can cause a whole new set of problems, such as root canals.

The dental profession has assigned each tooth a number, and every surface of a tooth a letter. If we find cavities in your teeth, you'll hear us name the numbers and letters for each one. Of course, we hope that you keep all the plaque off of your teeth by brushing and flossing regularly so that you'll never need to hear these numbers and letters.