Preventive Dentistry : An Achievable Dream

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Dental caries is an infectious disease that continues to be a veritable scourge for mankind from time immemorial. In spite of being a menacing disease of epidemic proportions, it can be prevented by simple diligent home care. The home care may vary from regular brushing and oral rinsing to variation in the diet towards a non-sticky fibrous food.

Above 80% of the population in India suffer from the ravages of dental caries. This disease affects the children from a very young age due to neglect of oral hygiene. 90% of the population suffers from periodontal disease but this disease is mainly seen in the older age group. If preventive practices are followed diligently, then this percentage can very well be a part of history. One requires foresight for the prevention of dental caries and prenatal care is of utmost importance. The child gets calcium and phosphorus required for odontogenesis from the mother's blood stream in the first trimester of life. For sound primary teeth, mother's health is of paramount importance. Mother should eat healthy and nutritious food and green vegetables.

Postnatal care begins immediately after birth, unlike the misbelief that oral care begins with the eruption of teeth. The child's oral cavity must be cleaned with a clean wet gauze or cloth after every feed. Most of the

children are unable to brush efficiently till the age of 8 years and hence the teeth should be cleaned by the parent. Brushing at night after the last meal is of utmost importance as food material that may remain in the oral cavity may enhance bacterial growth and decay. The parent is also cautioned against nursing caries caused as a result of bottle-feeding at night and not cleaning the oral cavity. A misconception rooted deep in the minds of the people is that milk is the cause of nursing caries. It is true that milk has cariogenic potential but the actual crux of the problem lies with prolonged and frequent on-demand feeding.

Excessive human fondling and kissing should be avoided as studies show that bacteria causing dental caries can be transmitted from mother to child. A genetic factor has now been introduced in the initiation and progress of dental caries via transmission of streptococcus mutans. The child's first dental check up should be at 6 months of age or during the eruption of the first milk/deciduous tooth. This visit to the dental surgeon is imperative as during this visit, the dental surgeon will perform a thorough oral examination and provide anticipatory guidance regarding dental and oral development, fluoride status, non-nutritive habits, injury prevention and oral hygiene programme.

Fig 1 : Normal dentition

Fig 2 : Nursing caries

Fluoride is a landmark discovery that changed the motto of dentistry from conservative treatment rendered to a preventive approach. In India, community water fluoridation is not implemented, hence small steps like using fluoridated toothpaste as per dental surgeon's recommendations and reducing the risk of dental decay by applying pit and fissure sealants may be taken. Pit and fissure sealants prevent occlusal decay by reducing the depth of the pits and fissures as well as by the anti-caries action of fluoride in the sealants.

A strong relationship exists between sucrose consumption and caries experience. When sucrose is consumed, the pH drops rapidly and demineralization of the enamel can occur. Hence, sugar substitutes like xylitol are introduced and promoted. Xylitol is as sweet as sugar and has 40% less calories. Xylitol reduces plaque accumulation and hence reduces streptococcus mutans

in plaque.

Another preventive aspect in dentistry is interceptive orthodontics and minor tooth movement that can be achieved by the same. Cross bite correction is achieved by removable appliance and in case of premature tooth extraction, the space should be maintained by various space maintainers that will help prevent mal-occlusion at a later date. Some deleterious habits such as mouth breathing, tongue thrusting and thumb sucking can be discontinued by giving removable appliances. Such treatment will help decrease or eliminate these deleterious habits.

“Stitch in time saves nine” is an apt proverb. Regular dental check-ups are small steps that will go a long way in the prevention of dental caries and achieving a healthy and beautiful dentition.

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