Other problems of older teeth

- **Old fillings** may develop leaks around the edges, allowing cavities to recur. Some fillings may fall out, leaving a hole that may require urgent attention to prevent pain and serious problems.

- Wearing a **partial denture**. Dentures can act as a trap for food particles and plaque bacteria, causing bad breath, gum problems, and greater risk of decay in the adjacent teeth. Dentures should be cleaned after eating, and removed overnight.

- **Dry mouth** - It is not uncommon to have the feeling of dryness in the mouth. Sucking sweets or frequent sips of juice or sweetened drinks to make the mouth more comfortable can greatly increase the risk of decay. Sipping water frequently is a better way of coping with dry mouth.

- Chronic illnesses and an increasing need for medications. Some **medications** make the mouth feel dry, or taste unpleasant. It is highly desirable to use water to relieve the dryness or bad taste; sucking sweets should be avoided.

- **Gastric reflux problems** [a sour taste may indicate that juices from the stomach are being regurgitated into the mouth] — gastric juices contain strong acids that can cause damage to tooth enamel and exposed root surfaces.

- **Irregular toothbrushing** [not enough fluoride to protect exposed root surfaces]. A recent change in brushing habits/frequency, brought on by loss of dexterity in our hands eg onset of arthritis, may increase the risk of decay. A long-term habit of skipping brushing, particularly at bedtime may become a problem when we have some exposed root surfaces [which are particularly vulnerable to decay].

In all cases your dentist will discuss the various approaches with you, to help you settle on a plan to protect your teeth, and help damaged teeth to recover.

Your teeth will benefit most when:

- decay is detected early
- the underlying causes of the decay problem are identified and realistic goals are set
- a treatment plan, including home care, is agreed on and followed
- followup appointments are kept.

Further information

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Root decay is typical of the different dental problems that face us as we become older. Extra attention is required to keep our teeth and gums healthy and free from decay.

Understanding how changes in our health and lifestyle can cause changes in our eating and oral hygiene patterns is the first step towards controlling most decay problems.

Establishing home care of our teeth and healthy eating habits are key factors in preventing decay.

As happens with teeth at all ages, EVERY TIME we eat or drink our teeth are under attack from acid produced by plaque bacteria, as well as acidic foods and drinks.

Tooth decay mainly occurs when too much sugar is eaten, and there is insufficient fluoride to toughen the teeth and offset the effects of plaque acid attack.

Fluoride rebuilds early decay and toughens damaged teeth and roots

When active decay is present, the root surface is softened, due to a ‘honeycomb’ effect caused by the loss of tooth minerals. Early decay can be repaired by the use of fluoride to rebuild and toughen the tooth structure.

Brush with a soft-bristled toothbrush; vigorous scrubbing can cause abrasion of softened root surfaces. Always use a fluoride toothpaste. Additional fluoride products may also be recommended.

After recovering, the roots may appear darkly-stained, but will be strong and in no need of filling, except for cosmetic purposes.

Recession and root decay

Gum infections and damage caused by brushing our teeth too hard, may have caused the gums to recede. This is frequently called ‘getting long in the tooth’.

Root surfaces are softer and more porous than the crown of the tooth. Continued vigorous scrubbing may wear away the surface and cause the root to become sensitive to cold and sweet foods and drinks.

Root surfaces are usually yellowish in colour and are prone to discolouration. They absorb stains readily [eg from smoking, drinking tea and coffee and eating strongly-coloured foods].

Root surfaces are not as resistant to decay as the rest of the tooth. When active decay occurs, root surfaces become softened and the staining may be brownish in colour.

Thirty years ago, 70% of people aged over 65 had lost all of their teeth and were wearing dentures.

People are now expecting to keep their teeth for life, and over 70% of older adults now retain many of their own natural teeth.