

WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE . . .

BETWEEN A "REGULAR CLEANING," A ROOT PLANING,
AND PERIODONTAL MAINTENANCE?

A regular cleaning, a root planing procedure, and periodontal maintenance are not the same. The following information will help explain the difference.

What is a regular or standard cleaning?

A regular cleaning is known as a prophylaxis in dental terms. The American Dental Association describes a prophylaxis as *scaling and polishing procedures to remove coronal plaque, calculus and stains.*

- *Scaling* means to use a dental instrument to scrape away deposits from the teeth. An electric device, called an ultra-sonic or sonic scaler, may also be used. This *scaling* is performed on the part of the tooth that is exposed above the gum line—in other words, on the *coronal* or crown of the tooth.
- *Calculus* is also known as *tartar* and is hard, mineralized deposit, somewhat like cement, that is formed from the plaque in the mouth and the minerals in a person's saliva.
- *Plaque* is a soft, sticky substance that forms on teeth, regardless of what types of foods are eaten, which is composed of bacteria and bacterial by-products.

A *regular* cleaning is recommended for persons who do not have any bone loss, periodontal disease, or infection around their teeth. There should also be no heavy bleeding, mobility of teeth, or gaps where the spaces around the roots of the teeth are exposed. In other words, the mouth should be healthy with no gum and bone problems.

What is a root planing procedure?

Root planing removes bacteria and their toxins, tartar, and diseased deposits from the surfaces of tooth roots. Scaling is required for the full length of the root surface, down to where the root, gum and bone meet. Root planing is typically one of the first steps in treating gum and bone disease (periodontal disease).

Periodontal disease is very common, but does not always have distinct symptoms. It is an inflammation and infection of the supporting structures of the teeth (gums, bone, ligaments, root surfaces) that eventually results in the loss of teeth. You may notice that your gums bleed easily, that you have a bad taste in your mouth that your gums appear red or swollen, that your teeth appear longer or have shifted. Or you may not notice anything at all.

What is *periodontal maintenance*?

If you have periodontal disease, you may require *root planing* to remove diseased deposits from the roots of your teeth. Other treatment, including surgery, may be required. After the disease process is under control, a *regular cleaning* is not appropriate anymore. Instead, you will require special on-going gum and bone care procedures, also known as *periodontal maintenance* to keep your mouth healthy.

How often do I need to have my teeth cleaned?

The old system of everyone having their teeth cleaned only twice a year has fallen out of favor. In fact, many believe that the idea actually came from the recommendations of a 1940's toothpaste advertisement!

While some people may be able to maintain their dental health with semi-annual cleanings, many patients find that their mouths and teeth stay in better shape when they have their teeth cleaned more frequently. Many dentists and hygienists are now setting up a patient's cleaning schedule based on their personal needs. This may be as often as four times a year.

My insurance pays for teeth cleaning twice a year. Why should I have it done more often?

Dental insurance isn't really insurance (a payment to cover the cost of a loss) at all. It is actually a money benefit, typically provided by an employer, to help their employees pay for routine dental treatment. The employer usually buys a plan based on the amount of the benefit and how much the premium costs per month. Most benefit plans are only designed to cover a portion of the total cost of a person's necessary dental treatment. For example, the dentist may recommend a crown for a tooth that has extensive decay, however, the dental plan may only cover the cost of a filling. This does not mean that the patient does not need a crown, only that the benefit is limited to a filling.

While twice yearly insurance paying toward the cost of teeth cleaning is common, that type of payment arrangement actually has no relationship to what any patient might really need. Many patients need cleanings more frequently. People who have heavy plaque and tenacious calculus buildup are prime candidates. Also people who are generally healthy but have certain types of systemic conditions, such as diabetes, or those taking specific medications, may need more frequent cleanings. The good news is that with the help of dental benefits, the amount you have to pay is reduced!