Oral Health Care Remains Important Even During a Pandemic

By Sharon Parsons, DDS

On March 17, the state of Ohio directed all health care providers, including dentists, to delay all non-essential procedures and surgeries. All dental offices were basically shut down overnight, only opening occasionally to provide emergency dental care to keep patients out of hospital emergency rooms which are dealing with coronavirus patients.

The state’s order to delay non-urgent care was necessitated by the need to preserve personal protective equipment (PPE) to ensure front line health care workers are protected in dealing with the coronavirus pandemic. Dentists understand the need to ensure our health care colleagues are protected. PPE inventories have now begun to stabilize through additional procurement, innovative production, expanded ability to disinfect masks, and conservation efforts.

The state of Ohio recently lifted the order to delay certain health care procedures including dental care. This is a positive development because oral health care is important in many ways. Good oral health care keeps Ohioans out of pain and away from infections and dental disease. Good oral health also preserves our ability to speak clearly and to eat all types of food to help ensure we can get proper nutrition.

We also know that good oral health is essential to overall health. Undiagnosed and untreated dental disease has been associated with a number of systemic health conditions, including heart disease, diabetes, stroke and pregnancy complications.

As dental offices re-open, it is important to remember that we are now living in a new world with COVID-19. While the state is allowing dentists to provide the full range of dental services, we must remember that the Ohio State Dental Board requires Ohio’s dentists to comply with recommendations related to Personal Protection Equipment and infection control from the CDC and the American Dental Association.

Dentists have been using PPE, including masks and gloves, for decades, and they follow strict infection control and sterilization procedures for the office, equipment and hand pieces. These protocols are regularly updated to address any
emerging issues, including COVID-19. Ohio dentists are following these guidelines.

During this pandemic, different protocols will be in place in dental offices, as in most other businesses. Accordingly, you will undoubtedly notice some differences when you return to the dental office. If you call because of a specific oral health condition, dentists may triage your situation via telephone or other technology before even arriving at the office. Once you do arrive at the office, you may have your temperature taken and be asked a series of questions related to your health. You may be asked to wait in your car until they are ready for you. Waiting rooms may be less crowded and have fewer chairs or more space between the chairs. You may notice your dentist and staff wearing a different type of face mask or face shield when providing care. All of these changes and more are designed to ensure dental patients are protected.

Hospitals and medical practitioners were given top priority for PPE, as was only right at the height of the pandemic, and many dentists donated their masks and gloves to help the cause. Because of this, some dental offices may not yet have the proper PPE necessary to treat their patients. Dental offices are doing their best to acquire necessary PPE, but it may take time. If your dentist is not open, please be patient. They will open as soon as they are able to make it safe and appropriate to do so. Everyone on the dental team is working to put these new protocols in place and develop the “new normal” to ensure that Ohioans receive the oral care that they need in a safe manner.

So as we remember to wash our hands regularly during this pandemic, we should also remember to brush and floss our teeth and visit the dentist because doing so remains important to maintaining good oral health and good overall health.

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