

# Dental care: Safe and essential for our public health



Dental care can be performed safely during the pandemic, and remains a vital part of your overall health. ( *Stock Photo* )

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Posted  
12/26/2020 7:00 AM

The patients calling into our dental offices are understandably nervous. They ask important questions: What will my visit be like during COVID-19? Will I be safe?

Fortunately, we have been ready for these challenging times for many years.

All across Illinois, dental offices are welcoming patients back for care they put off this spring and summer when coronavirus forced them to shutter all but emergency treatment. As cases surge again this fall and government officials put in necessary restrictions, our message is clear: Dental care is safe, essential and must continue because it is a valuable part of our individual and collective public health.

In the early 1980s, the emergence of HIV and AIDS forced all health care providers to take extra precautions -- especially in dental offices, where potential exposure from the nature of the oral care we provide is highest. Detailed infection prevention strategies were developed, our staffs and dentists went through comprehensive training and education, and we embraced safety standards by the federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration.

Today, the protective masks, gloves and gowns we have been wearing all this time and the strict attention to cleaning and disinfecting has become commonplace in health care facilities as we all fight this insidious disease.

While our dental offices closed for a few weeks initially, both our industry experts and government officials agree: It's not only misguided to consider seeing the dentist a safety or health care risk, it does more harm to skip such care as the pandemic continues.

Put simply, our mouths are a window to our entire body's health. When our mouths and gums are healthy, we see the benefits. But when we let our oral health suffer, even if we do not notice any obvious signs of problems, they are sure to develop. Chipped or cracked teeth, cavities, sore or bleeding gums can lead to many larger issues. If oral infection spreads throughout the body, research has shown it can contribute to dementia, heart disease and other life-threatening health challenges.

Not only can minor dental issues become major ones over time, they also are sure to be more costly to fix.

In implementing infection prevention and control guidance from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, we have stepped up during the pandemic to show patients we are serious about their safety and health. When you call to set up an appointment, you're asked detailed health questions and again when you arrive. We have you call before you come in the office for your appointment, wear your mask and take your temperature. Patients wait in their vehicles or in our socially distanced waiting rooms that no longer have toys or magazines but plenty of hand sanitizer -- all to put safety first.

Even in the dental chair you notice the difference. Our dentists and assistants have even more masks, gloves and other coverings to reduce exposure. We thoroughly scrub down chairs, utensils and other equipment before and after each visit. We have developed a purchasing program through the Illinois State Dental Society to ensure our members have adequate supplies of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) to keep everyone safe and healthy.

A summer survey of dentists nationally by the American Dental Association found our efforts are working, as fewer than 1% of dentists had contracted the virus. A recent ADA article noted the CDC reports there have been no documented cases of COVID-19 transmission in a clinical dental setting.

Dental care is safe. Dental care is essential. And dental care should be here to stay throughout the pandemic. Our public health depends on it.

- Eric Larson is executive director of the Illinois State Dental Society in Springfield.