**HDS**

Hawaii Dental Service

# The Dreaded Cavity:
# How to Prevent Tooth Decay and Gum Disease

*No one likes to get cavities or lose a tooth. We've all heard that avoiding sweets and brushing our teeth help prevent cavities, but we may not know how tooth decay occurs. Preventing cavities begins with first understanding how tooth decay starts.*

## How Tooth Decay Occurs

Tooth decay is the gradual breakdown of a tooth's enamel and interior tissue. This can lead to a cavity and eventually the death of a tooth. Gum disease, which is separate from tooth decay, attacks the gum tissue and bone that support the teeth. Both of these conditions are caused by uncontrolled growth of bacteria in the mouth. Some bacterial species—especially *Streptococcus mutans*—are responsible for tooth decay.

When saliva mixes with bacteria in your mouth, it creates a sticky film called plaque that adheres to the surface of teeth. The bacteria grow by using sugar from food particles in the mouth. As bacteria multiply, they excrete lactic acid and this adds to the layer of plaque. If this plaque isn't removed, the acid dissolves the tooth's enamel and inflames the gum tissue.
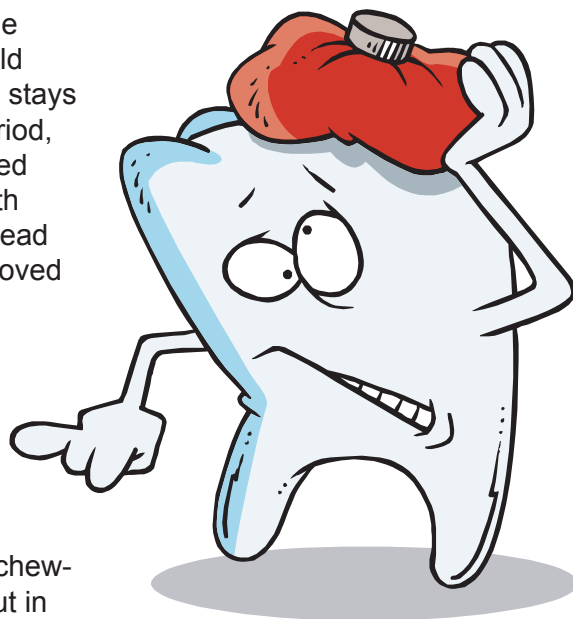
Gum disease affects both the gums and the bones that hold teeth in place. When plaque stays on teeth for an extended period, it forms a hard covering called tartar that won't come off with brushing. Tartar, which can lead to gum disease, can be removed by your dentist.

## Floss and Brush to Break the Chain of Events

Plaque can be removed by chewing or moving the tongue, but in places where it's hard to reach, plaque can build up and damage teeth and gum lines. That's why oral hygiene is so important to maintaining healthy teeth and gums.

To break the chain of events involved with bacteria and plaque build-up, remove plaque from your teeth's surfaces by flossing at least once a day and brushing at least twice a day. Be sure to replace your toothbrush every three months or when the bristles start to spread out.

If you don't brush regularly, plaque can stick to your teeth. This could lead to gingivitis, which causes gums to become red, swollen and bleed. Left untreated, gingivitis can develop into periodontitis (gum disease), which can wear away the tissues and the bones that hold teeth in place.

## The All-Important Dental Check Up

In addition to flossing and brushing regularly, it's important to visit a dentist on a regular basis. This is especially important for those who are less resistant to bacteria, which make them more susceptible to cavities and gum disease. Your dentist can detect early signs of decay, gum disease, oral cancer and other conditions, and help provide the care you need.