What is tooth decay?

Also known as a cavity, tooth decay is a spot on a tooth where acid formed by food and plaque has dissolved the outer surface of the protective coating or enamel of the tooth.

Who is at risk for tooth decay?

Everyone. We all have bacteria in our mouth that can cause tooth decay. Those who eat diets high in sugar, don't have fluoride in their water or have poor oral care habits have the highest risk. Many seniors have added risk of decay from the side effects of some medicines or complications from health problems. Wear and tear in older fillings and receding gum lines that allow the root of the tooth to be exposed may also lead to tooth decay.

What can be done to prevent tooth decay?

- Brush your teeth twice a day with a toothpaste that has fluoride in it

- Clean between your teeth daily with floss or inter-proximal cleaner

- Eat a healthy balanced diet that is low in sugar and sweets

- Limit snacks between meals

- Visit your dentist regularly for cleanings, x-rays and exams

- Ask your dentist about protective sealants to prevent decay in deep pits in your teeth

How is tooth decay detected and fixed?

X-rays allow dentists to look for changes in your teeth that may be too small to be seen with the eye. After finding out how deep the cavity has gone into the tooth, the dentist will let you know what can be done to fix it. A small cavity may be fixed with a small filling while a larger cavity may need a crown or even need to be pulled. If a cavity has infected the nerve of the tooth, a root canal may be needed before the tooth is filled or crowned.

What can happen if decay is left untreated?

If decay is left untreated, it can cause serious problems. You may get an infection that causes pain and swelling that spreads into areas of your face. The nerve of the tooth may become infected and die, leading to more treatment needs. The tooth may break off, making it harder or impossible to repair. In extreme instances, severe tooth decay has resulted in infections that have caused death.