

Patient Information Leaflet

Deep decay in a tooth

As a patient, what you need to know is:

- Dental decay (caries), one of the most common diseases on earth, has caused a deep hole in your tooth. The decay is close to the nerve but the tooth is still alive and not causing pain. One way of treating deep decay is to drill or scrape out all of the decay and risk exposing the nerve of the tooth. Your dentist will then need to carry out extensive treatment on the affected tooth: this may involve placement of a root filling and a crown or other restoration to protect the cusps of the root filled tooth.
- The methods of treatment of deep decay in teeth which are alive and not causing symptoms have changed! With your permission, I propose to avoid scraping out all the decay because this could expose the nerve and then a root filling or extraction would be needed. Having removed part of the decay, I will fill the tooth and this will stop the progress of the decay. I will review the tooth in 6 or 12 months and take an X-ray then (or earlier should you have any discomfort.) Provided the tooth remains alive, no further treatment should be needed. Please note that, on the follow up X-ray, the decay that I have left will show as a black area.
- You should be aware that this technique has gained credibility for vital teeth as the research base for this has expanded and become positive.

As a patient, what you also need to know is:

- If you change dentists and you have a subsequent X-ray on the tooth with deep decay, your new dentist could say that the previous dentist has left decay in a tooth when, in fact, (s)he has done this based on good clinical research. That's why you need to know what your dentist has been trying to achieve.
- Placing a well-sealed filling over the decay will ensure that the decay doesn't come back. There is, however, always a small chance that your tooth will die and a root filling will be needed, but this is much less than if the nerve of the tooth is exposed by drilling away all the decay.
- You have had deep decay in your tooth. That therefore means that you have a problem with your diet and/or with your oral hygiene/toothbrushing. You will therefore need to address this – your dentist and/or their hygienist will give you advice on this.

