



Frequently Asked Questions About Radiographs (X-rays)

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What are radiographs?

Radiographs, sometimes referred to as x-rays, are pictures that allow your dentist to see what's happening under your gums and in other areas of your mouth that are not visible clinically (to the dentist).

Why does my dentist need radiographs?

Radiographs help your dentist evaluate your teeth and supporting bone, and help to diagnose dental disease. If you're experiencing pain or another dental problem, radiographs can help your dentist understand the cause of your discomfort. Your dentist may recommend that radiographs of your mouth be taken for many reasons, including to look for areas of tooth decay, to check for infection to the bone surrounding your teeth, to identify periodontal disease, and in children, to see the secondary (adult) teeth before they come in.¹

Radiation from dental X-rays is extremely low. However, your dentist will take every precaution to minimize your exposure to radiation. A leaded apron placed over your midsection will minimize exposure to the abdomen and should be used when any dental radiograph is taken. In addition, a leaded thyroid shield (also known as a "thyroid collar") can protect the thyroid gland from radiation, and should be used whenever possible.¹

What are the different kinds of dental radiographs?

There are four types of dental radiographs

- Bitewing—When taking these radiographs, the patient bites on a paper tab. The resulting radiograph shows the crown portions ((the part of the teeth that is outside of the gum tissue) of the top and bottom teeth together.
- Periapical—This type of radiograph shows one or two complete teeth from crown to root (that is, the entire tooth above and below the gum tissue)
- Palatal (also called occlusal)—This radiograph captures all the upper and lower teeth in one shot while the film rests on the biting surface of the teeth.
- Panoramic (also called panorex)—Using a special machine that rotates around the patient's head, this radiograph captures the entire jaws and teeth in one shot. It's generally used to plan treatment for dental implants, check for impacted wisdom teeth, and detect jaw problems.²

What does the American Dental Association (ADA) say about radiographs?

American Dental Association guidelines recommend that dentists limit radiographs to the areas that are needed for diagnosis and treatment. These guidelines also recommend that dentists not prescribe routine dental radiographs at regular intervals (such as once a year) for all patients. Different patients have different needs and should therefore have radiographs on an as-needed basis.

Based on the dentist's clinical judgment, the patient's risk for disease, and other factors, the ADA guidelines suggest that dentists should minimize their patients' exposure to radiation by limiting survey x-rays and taking x-rays only at a frequency that is necessary to diagnose oral disease based upon risk.¹

I'm pregnant. Are radiographs safe?

As with all other patients, your dentist should only prescribe dental radiographs if they are of potential benefit. It's also important to remember that neglecting a dental problem during pregnancy *is not* recommended by the American Dental Association, the American Congress of Obstetricians and Gynecologists and the American Academy of Pediatrics, they encourage woman to get dental care contending that maintaining oral health is directly related to good overall health.³

What questions should I ask my dentist about radiographs?

- Based on your assessment of my risk for dental disease, how often do you expect to need radiographs?
- I'm pregnant. What are the benefits of having a radiograph now versus waiting until after my baby is born?

1 American Dental Association, Mouth Healthy, "X-rays (Radiographs)," <http://www.mouthhealthy.org/en/az-topics/x/x-rays>. Accessed 11/10/2015.

2 MedLine Plus. "Dental X-Rays," <http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/ency/article/003801.htm>. Accessed 11/10/2015.

3 American Dental Association, Mouth Healthy, "Is It Safe To Go To The Dentist During Pregnancy?," <http://www.mouthhealthy.org/en/pregnancy/concerns>. Accessed 11/10/2015.

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