

How to Take Care of Your Teeth

Good oral health is important for your total well-being. The condition of the tissues and structures of your mouth affect your general physical condition, ability to chew and speak, appearance, and personal relations.

To help prevent tooth decay and gum disease, practice proper brushing and flossing and see your dentist regularly. Ask your dentist or dental hygienist to show you proper brushing technique. Also, you may want to ask your dentist about additional ways to prevent tooth decay, such as sealants for teeth and fluoride treatments.

Brush your teeth correctly for at least 2 minutes at least twice a day. The most important time to brush is before you go to sleep. It is also a good idea to brush or rinse after meals. Floss between your teeth once a day.

Brushing your teeth

Here's a good way to brush your teeth:

- Position the head of the toothbrush against your teeth, with the tips of the bristle angled against the gum line at a 45-degree angle.
- Move the brush in a gentle, circular scrubbing motion. Brush the outer surfaces of each tooth, upper and lower, keeping the bristles angled against the gum line.
- Use the same motion to brush the inside surfaces of the teeth.
- Scrub chewing surfaces of all teeth. Only the tips of the bristles on the toothbrush can clean the teeth. Use a light pressure so that the bristles do not bend. Let the bristles reach into the grooves of the teeth. Change the position of the toothbrush often.
- To clean inside the front teeth, tilt the brush vertically and make gentle up and down strokes with the front part of the brush over the teeth and gum tissue of the upper and lower jaws.
- Brush the tongue to refresh your breath and remove bacteria.

A brush with soft, end-rounded or polished bristles is less likely to injure gum tissues than one with hard bristles. A brush with hard bristles can cause abrasion to the teeth. Abrasion is the wearing away of the tooth structure, especially along the gum line. Abrasions make it easier for bacteria and acids to damage the tooth because the hard, protective enamel layer has been brushed away. The hard bristles can also cause damage by making the gum line recede (push back) away from the tooth.

Replace your brush at the first sign that the bristles have become splayed or matted. Store your brush uncovered in a dry place so that it can dry out between brushings. Never share your toothbrush with anyone. It contains bacteria that can be passed from one person to another no matter how well you clean the brush.

Some electric toothbrushes can clean better than manual brushes. People with handicaps and young children may find an electric toothbrush easier to use. Ask your dentist which type of brush will clean your teeth more effectively.

Flossing your teeth

Flossing is the best way to remove food and plaque from between the teeth, an area the toothbrush cannot reach. (Plaque is a sticky material made of mucus and saliva, food particles, and bacteria that live in the mouth.) When you floss, use the following technique:

- Cut off about 18 inches of floss and wind most of it around the middle finger of one hand. Wind the rest around the middle finger of your other hand, to take up the floss as you use it.
- Gently, using a sawing motion, pull the floss between 2 of your teeth, being careful not to snap it into the gums.
- When the floss reaches the gum line, curve it into a C-shape against one tooth and slip it into the space between the tooth and the gum until you feel resistance.
- Holding the floss tightly against the tooth, move it up and down away and toward the gum, scraping the side of the tooth.
- Wind the floss around the middle finger, so that a fresh section is in position and repeat for all teeth. Not using a fresh section of floss can spread bacteria and could cause a gum infection (gingivitis).
- Remember to floss the backs of your rear 4 teeth.

If you keep having bleeding from your gums, it is a sign that something is not healthy. It should be looked at by your dentist if it continues for more than 5 days.

Buying dental products

Look for the American Dental Association (ADA) seal of acceptance when determining the effectiveness of a product.

Always buy toothpastes with fluoride. The fluoride helps prevent cavities. You can buy toothpastes with special ingredients for controlling tartar or for whitening teeth.

Mouthwashes are generally used to temporarily freshen bad breath. Some mouthwashes may help you have less plaque. Fluoride mouthwashes also help protect the teeth against decay. Look for a mouthwash that is alcohol free. Mouthwashes that contain alcohol may dry out your mouth and further irritate any inflamed tissue you may have.

Preventing decay with a healthy diet

Decay occurs only when the inside of the mouth is acidic. This happens when you eat starchy or sugary foods (carbohydrates). You can help prevent decay by avoiding highly sugary or sticky foods or brushing your teeth right after you eat

these foods. Rinsing with water after you eat or drink sugar-containing foods can also help reduce the amount of acid and help wash away food plaque from the teeth.

Snacks to avoid include:

- Candy, cookies, cake, pie
- Soda pop (both regular and diet) and other sugary liquids
- Gum sweetened with sugar, including high fructose corn syrup
- Crackers, breadsticks, chips
- Dried fruits; raisins are not only sweet but also sticky and cling to the teeth.

Snacks to choose include:

- Fresh vegetables
- Cheese
- Unsalted nuts
- Unsweetened fruit juices
- Popcorn (unsalted)
- Hard-boiled eggs
- Bean dips.

Fresh fruit is another healthy snack. However, some fruits, such as oranges, pineapples, and peaches, are high in natural sugar and acid. Frequent fruit snacks may damage your teeth. It is best to rinse your mouth with water after eating these fruits and to not brush your teeth until 30 minutes after you ate the fruit. The natural acid in the fruit that is left in your mouth after you eat it may temporarily soften the outer layer of the tooth. This temporary softening could allow your toothbrush to scrub away your tooth enamel.

A healthy diet is the cornerstone of dental health. A diet rich in fresh fruits and vegetables and whole grains is healthy for teeth and gums. Foods such as raw apples help clean the teeth and make good snacks. Milk is a good snack and a good mealtime drink. Drink it with sweet foods to help wash sugar from your mouth.

Chewing sugarless gum after meals promotes production of saliva, a natural mouth rinse, and helps neutralize tooth-decaying acids in plaque. It is good to brush your teeth after eating, but if you can't, chewing sugarless gum is an alternative. Chewing gums sweetened with Xylitol can reduce and control the amount of bacteria that cause decay.

Dental care during pregnancy

Women who are pregnant may notice that their gums are swollen and bleed when they brush or floss their teeth. The bleeding is usually related to the increased blood flow to the gums caused by hormonal changes during pregnancy. The increased bleeding usually goes away after delivery. In the meantime, be sure to floss every day and brush your teeth with a soft toothbrush. You can use a mouthwash that has no alcohol or use just warm water to cleanse your mouth and gums.

Try to visit the dentist at least once during your pregnancy to have your teeth examined. Tell the dentist that you are pregnant. Most dental work can be done safely while you are pregnant, but some procedures and treatments may need to be postponed until after pregnancy. It may be a good idea to have your dentist call your pregnancy healthcare provider to help determine which tests and treatments are safe for you. Antibiotics, pain medicines, or even X-rays are often necessary for some special dental problems during pregnancy. Your dentist can consult with your pregnancy healthcare provider before proceeding with treatment.

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