

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 prevent tooth decay and gum disease, it is important to see your dentist regularly. Also, it is essential that you know how to keep your teeth clean. Proper brushing and flossing techniques are important. During your next dental visit, ask your dentist or hygienist to show you proper brushing technique. In addition, become familiar with the instructions below.

Also, ask your dentist about new methods for preventing tooth decay such as sealants for teeth and fluoride treatments.



Brushing Your Teeth

The American Dental Association suggests that you brush your teeth in the following manner:

- 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 clean. Use a light pressure so as not to bend the bristles. Let them reach into the grooves of the teeth. Change the position of the toothbrush frequently.
- 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.

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. 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.

Electric toothbrushes are not more effective at removing plaque than manual toothbrushes.

Flossing Your Teeth

Flossing is the best way to remove plaque from between the teeth, an area the toothbrush cannot reach. 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.
- With the thumb of one hand and the forefinger of the other, guide an inch of floss between the teeth. Holding the floss tightly, use a gentle sawing motion, 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.

To care for your teeth, brush them in the morning. Before you go to bed, brush them again, rinse with a fluoride mouthwash, and then floss, which will work in the fluoride between the teeth.

Buying Dental Products

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

Always buy fluoride toothpastes, which help prevent cavities. No toothpaste has been recognized by ADA as effective against plaque.

Listerine, an over-the-counter mouthwash, reduces plaque levels. In some studies, Listerine used twice a day reduced plaque levels by more than 50%. However, some studies have shown water rinses to be as effective as Listerine. Fluoride mouthwashes such as ACT or Fluoriguard also help protect the teeth against decay.

Preventing Decay through Nutrition

Decay occurs only when the inside of the mouth is acidic. This happens when you eat starchy or sugary foods (carbohydrates). Starchy foods linger in the mouth longer than sugary foods. It is best to reduce your intake of these foods and to eat them at mealtimes.

Some foods may have protective qualities. Cocoa and rice contain a substance that protects against tooth decay. Phosphates in foods are also beneficial. A very small portion of aged cheese or raw peanuts, eaten before or after a snack or meal, helps to neutralize mouth acids and to remineralize teeth.

Fibrous foods, such as fruits and vegetables, also help to prevent tooth decay. They stimulate salivation, a natural mouth rinse. When salivation is decreased because of diseases of the salivary glands or as a side effect of drugs, or is low in volume, as during sleep, tooth decay is more likely to occur.

Snacks to avoid include:

- candy, cookies, cake, pie
- soda pop and other sugary liquids
- sugar gum
- crackers, breadsticks, chips
- dried fruits; raisins are not only sweet but also sticky and cling to the teeth.

Snacks to choose include:

- fresh fruit; however, oranges, pineapples, and peaches are high in natural sugar; frequent fruit snacks may damage your teeth
- fresh vegetables

- cheese
- unsalted nuts
- unsweetened fruit juices
- popcorn (unsalted)
- hard-boiled eggs
- bean dips.

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 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.