

Healthy mouth

Good oral health isn't only about your teeth. Get the facts about how the health of your mouth, gums and teeth can affect your general health. Practice the best habits to help keep your mouth — and your whole self — healthy.

Oral health and overall health

Your mouth is full of bacteria. Most of them are harmless. Brushing and flossing can help keep the bacteria level under control. But without daily care, bacteria can reach levels that might lead to tooth decay and gum disease.

Gum disease and tooth loss can affect more than your mouth. Researchers looking at data collected from more than 57,000 women age 55 and older found that gum disease was associated with a 12 percent higher risk of death from any cause. The loss of all teeth was associated with a 17 percent higher risk of death. The results were published in the *Journal of the American Heart Association*.

Brushing basics

Brushing your teeth with fluoride toothpaste reduces the impact of bacteria that can form acids that damage your teeth. Remember to take your time when brushing. The American Dental Association says you should take two minutes to brush your teeth. You want to cover the front, back and top of every tooth.

Put your brush at a 45-degree angle to your gums. Brush gently around your gum line in short strokes. Replace toothbrushes at least once every three months or when the bristles get frayed. Soft-bristled brushes are recommended.

Saliva

Saliva does more than simply wash food away. It lessens the effect of acids, which helps protect you from microbes that might lead to disease. Saliva contains calcium, fluoride and phosphate, three minerals that help keep tooth surfaces strong.

While there's no evidence that apples will really keep the dentist away, fruits and vegetables do increase saliva production. This can help make your mouth less acidic for your teeth. Peanuts and cheese do this as well.



Gum health

The CDC reports that half of adults over 30 in the United States have gum disease. Gum disease is caused by plaque, the sticky film of bacteria that is constantly forming on your teeth. The condition is usually painless and you may not know you have it.

Gum disease may make your gums tender and more likely to bleed. This problem, called gingivitis, can often be fixed by brushing and flossing every day.

If you have tender or bleeding gums, you might have gum disease. If you think you might have gum disease, make an appointment with a dentist as soon as you can.

Don't let gingivitis become periodontitis.

Advanced gum disease is called periodontitis, from the Greek words for "around the tooth." The CDC says about 5 to 15 percent of Americans have periodontitis. It can lead to the loss of tissue and bone that support your teeth. It may become more severe over time and your teeth may feel loose. While the connection is not conclusive, some studies have linked severe gum disease with diabetes.

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Tooth decay

Tooth decay is caused by plaque, which thrives on the natural and added sugars in the foods we eat. Plaque produces acids that destroy enamel, the hard outer layer of a tooth. As time passes, tooth decay can occur, resulting in little holes in your teeth called cavities. To help lower your risk of tooth decay, brush two times a day with fluoride toothpaste. Limiting sweets and soft drinks helps too.

Toothaches

A very painful toothache may be a sign of an abscessed tooth. An abscess is a severe infection under your gums. It can be caused by tooth decay, periodontal disease or a cracked tooth. If the cause is an abscess, quick treatment is important because an infection from an abscess can spread to other parts of your body and cause serious health problems. But see your doctor any time you experience painful toothaches.

An abscessed tooth may be treated with antibiotics or by draining the infection. If you suspect an abscess, see your dentist as soon as possible.

Bad breath

Maybe your bad breath is from all that garlic bread you ate last night. But if bad breath lingers for days, there's likely another cause. One of the prime culprits is bacteria. At mealtimes, some amount of food gets left on your teeth. Bacteria feed on that extra food, and that can leave a bad odor. There may be other causes for bad breath, such as a lack of saliva, a smoking or tobacco habit or other health conditions. If you're practicing good oral hygiene but are still experiencing bad breath, see your dentist to determine the cause. Your mouth, and your loved ones, will thank you for it.

Root canals

No one wants to hear they need a root canal. But it's an important procedure to handle unhealthy tooth pulp. Diseased or inflamed tooth pulp could lead to losing your tooth. During the procedure, the dentist will remove the diseased pulp and clean and seal the root canal. While root canal has a reputation as a painful ordeal, it's a simple procedure that isn't usually painful.

Dental sealants

Dental sealants are useful tools in preventing tooth decay in children. They are thin plastic coatings that protect the back teeth and reduce risk for cavities. The National Institutes of Health recommends that all children get dental sealants as soon as their molars come in. The Centers for Disease Control reports that 30 to 38 percent of children and adolescents have dental sealants.

Diet and dental health

Don't expect your dentist to hand out candy at Halloween. The American Dental Association and the 2015 U.S. Dietary Guidelines for Americans agree: Sugar consumption is linked to tooth decay.

Sugar comes by many names. The Dietary Guidelines recommend limiting added sugar to no more than 10 percent of calories per day. Common examples of added sugars include corn syrup, dextrose, fructose, glucose, honey, lactose, malt syrup, maltose, molasses and sucrose. Read nutrition labels and ingredient lists on packaged foods and beverages.

Keep these diet tips in mind:

- Drink plenty of water.
- Eat a variety of plant foods along with lean proteins and low-fat dairy foods.
- Choose healthy snacks like fruit or vegetables or a piece of cheese.
- Eat acidic food with other foods.

Summary

For good dental health, follow the National Institutes of Health advice:

- Always brush twice a day with fluoride toothpaste.
- Clean between your teeth every day with dental floss or an interdental cleaner.
- Visit your dentist regularly for checkups and cleanings.

Sources

- American Dental Association: Mouth Healthy, Oral Health (Accessed 6/21/2017)
- American Dental Association, Two Minutes to Brush, April 2012
- American Dental Association: Mouth Healthy, Food Tips (Accessed 6/21/17)
- National Institutes of Health: Dental erosion and severe tooth decay related to soft drinks, May 2009

This handout contains general health and wellness information and is not a substitute for your doctor's care. You should consult an appropriate health care professional for your specific needs. Some treatments mentioned may not be covered by your health plan. Please refer to your benefit plan documents for information about coverage.