

Teeth and Gums

Here are some simple tips to follow for dental health:

- Visit your dentist once or twice a year for checkups.
- Brush after meals with a toothbrush that has soft or medium bristles.
- Use toothpaste with fluoride.
- Use dental floss every day.
- Eat fewer sweets, especially between meals.
- Do not smoke or chew tobacco products.

Fighting bad breath

Bad breath...halitosis, whatever you call it, it's something almost all of us suffer from at some point in our lives. So what causes this timeless turnoff, and what can be done about it?

Infected gums

This can be one of the most obvious causes of bad breath. To get gums back into shape, brush thoroughly and often with a soft-bristle brush, and get into the habit of regular flossing. Your dentist can advise you of the appropriate treatment for all dental problems.

Dirty teeth

"There are more animals living in the scum on a man's teeth," claimed a 17th-century scientist, "than there are men in a whole kingdom." Whether or not there is any truth in this, teeth can certainly collect their fair share of odor-producing debris. Best for keeping oral bacteria to a minimum is frequent brushing (with or without toothpaste) or even just swishing the mouth with water.

A foul tongue

Many dentists believe that keeping a clean tongue may be even more effective at arresting offensive breath than keeping teeth clean. Tongue-brushing is something the ancient Romans did regularly; Mohammed also encouraged his followers to practice the custom. Brush very gently, with a soft-bristle brush and keep away from the very back of your tongue as this may cause a gagging reaction.

An empty stomach

Yes, skipping meals can cause foul breath as it reduces the production of saliva needed to flush away bacteria from teeth, tongue and gums. Stress can also lead to a dry mouth, which can cause double trouble when coupled with the increase in stomach acid that stress can cause. Chewing gum and lozenges can step up saliva flow, as can between-meal snacks such as fresh fruits and vegetables.

Smoking

Because it sours the mouth and disrupts digestion, smoking has been linked to bad breath for centuries. Chewing tobacco can also foul the breath.

Overuse of mouthwashes

Ironic as it may sound, mouthwashes may actually worsen a bad breath problem by irritating oral tissue, although it does mask bad odors temporarily. For an emergency pick-up, try a quick rinse with a mix of water and a few drops of peppermint oil.

Common dental problems

What causes my jaw to pop when I open?

There is a pad or disk that separates the jaw bone from the base of the skull. The primary cause of the "popping" occurs when you open your mouth too wide and the jaw bone "pops" off the pad or disk. Treatment is not required unless pain is associated with the "pop" or the jaw locks.

What causes tooth decay?

Tooth decay is caused by plaque in your mouth reacting with sugary and starchy deposits from food. This reaction produces acid which damages the enamel over time and weakens the tooth.

What can be done for ulcers or canker sores in the mouth?

Ulcers are very difficult to treat. There is no proven technique that will eliminate ulcers or speed the recovery time once they appear. There are a few medications that will give temporary relief from the pain, but they need to be started as soon as symptoms appear. Ulcers will generally diminish and disappear in two weeks.

How can I stop grinding my teeth at night?

Grinding your teeth can be very damaging to the teeth and also difficult to stop. If vigorous grinding occurs at night, teeth can be worn down to the gumline because the instinctive reflex to stop does not work while you are sleeping. Grinding due to stress can only be cured by removing the stress trigger. If grinding continues, a nightguard may be prescribed to prevent ultimate damage to the teeth.

As I get older, I don't have much saliva, making it difficult to talk, chew and swallow. What can I do?

Saliva production decreases with age. In order to slow the process, one must exercise the gland. This can be accomplished by chewing gum, chewing your food thoroughly or occasionally having a sugar-free piece of candy. Artificial saliva may also be prescribed.

Courtesy of the Academy of General Dentistry (www.agd.org)

Maintain healthy teeth

Here are six suggestions to help you maintain your dental health:

Early dental care -- even for infants -- is key. Healthy baby teeth help your child's jawbones and muscles develop normally, maintain space for permanent teeth and help your child eat and speak. Bring your child to the dentist before his or her first birthday, followed by visits every six months. [More information about children's dental health.](#)

Eating cranberries can reduce your risk of gum disease.

Compounds in the fruit help prevent bacteria in the mouth from sticking together and forming plaque.

Buy shred-proof or shred-resistant dental floss. If floss gets lodged between teeth, it can expand, push your teeth apart and cause pain. [Tips for effective flossing.](#)

Don't drink hot beverages while eating ice cream. Going from one temperature to extreme to another can cause hairline cracks in teeth because they contract and expand.

Apples, oranges, celery, carrots and high-fiber greens such as spinach, lettuce and broccoli can help whiten teeth. That's because these foods require lots of chewing, so they stimulate saliva production and minimize stain-producing bacteria on teeth.

Consider using an electric toothbrush. People who use electric toothbrushes do a good job of keeping their teeth well-brushed, mainly because they spend more time brushing than most people who use regular brushes. If you use a regular toothbrush, consider using a timer to ensure you brush for at least two minutes. [Tips for effective brushing.](#)

What to eat to keep your teeth

In addition to cranberries, other dietary selections and habits have distinct effects on the mouth's ability to handle cavity-causing bacterial attacks. [Find out what other foods have a positive effect on dental health.](#)

Brush and floss regularly for good oral health

Brushing and flossing are important parts of your daily routine. But it's not enough to brush at least twice a day and floss at least once a day - you have to do it correctly. Here's how:

Brushing technique

- The head of your toothbrush should be placed beside the teeth, and the tips of the bristles placed at a 45-degree-angle to the gumline.
- Move the toothbrush back and forth, using short strokes and a scrubbing motion, several times in each spot.
- Keep the bristles angled against the gumline, while you brush both the inner and outer surfaces of each tooth.
- Brush the chewing surfaces straight on.
- Clean the inside surfaces of the front teeth by tilting the brush vertically and making several up-and-down strokes with the front of the brush.
- Finish by brushing your tongue, which helps remove bacteria from your mouth.

Brushing up at the office

Did you know only 14 percent of people brush every day at work? Daytime brushing can help reduce bacteria, and keep your breath fresh.

Brushing tips

- Brush your teeth gently using short strokes. Apply just enough pressure to feel the bristles against the gums. If you are squashing the bristles, you're brushing too hard.
- Replace your toothbrush approximately every two to three months or as soon as the bristles are worn or bent. A worn-out toothbrush does not clean your teeth properly, and may actually injure your gums. You should also replace your toothbrush after you've had a cold.

- Be sure you are reaching every tooth. The toothbrush can only clean one or two teeth at a time, so you should be moving the toothbrush around frequently.
- Use a toothpaste that contains fluoride.
- Avoid toothbrushes with hard bristles, which can damage your gums. Use a toothbrush with soft, end-rounded bristles.
- Ask your dentist to recommend the type of toothbrush that would work best for you.

Flossing technique

- Break off about 18 inches of floss, and wind most of it around one of your middle fingers. Wind the remaining floss around the same finger of the other hand. This finger will take up the floss as it becomes used.
- Hold the floss tightly (without any slack) between your two hands, with about an inch of floss between them. Guide the floss between your teeth using a gentle sawing motion.
- When the floss reaches the gumline, curve it into a C-shape against the tooth. Gently slide it into the space between the gum and the tooth until you feel resistance.
- Hold the floss against the tooth. Gently scrape the side of the tooth, moving the floss away from the gum.
- Repeat this technique on all of your teeth, including the teeth in back.

Flossing tips

- Establish a regular pattern for flossing so that you don't miss any teeth.
- As with brushing, flossing should be done gently. Improper flossing can injure your gums.
- If you have not been flossing regularly, your gums may bleed and be sore for the first five or six days. As plaque is broken up and bacteria removed, your gums will heal and the bleeding will stop.
- By age eight, children should be able to floss their own teeth. To make it easier, use a loop of floss. Simply tie the ends of a 10-inch piece of floss, forming a circle. Hold the floss tightly between the thumbs and forefingers, and use the technique above.
- A floss holder can make flossing easier for those who do not have good finger dexterity. Special picks and sticks are also available to help those who find floss difficult to work with. Consult your dentist about the best technique for you.