



ABCs of Dental Care

Oral health essentials

Achieving good oral health and preventing problems like cavities and gum disease is as easy as A-B-C:

- Acquire healthy dental care habits.
- Brush and floss regularly.
- Conquer gum disease and tooth decay.

Then, you can enjoy a healthy smile that lasts a lifetime.



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Acquire healthy dental care habits

Visit your dentist

- **Get dental checkups and cleanings.** See your dentist regularly to help prevent oral health problems before they cause pain or require major treatment.
- **Share your complete medical and dental history** with your dentist on your first visit. Then, continue to tell your dentist about any health changes each time you go back — even if the updates don't seem related to your oral health.
- **Sit back and relax.** For more stress-free dental visits, choose a time when you're not rushed, bring along your favorite music and be sure to discuss any concerns with your dentist.

Did you know? An oral exam can detect early signs of health issues such as oral cancer, diabetes, heart disease and more.

Keep it clean

- **Brush and floss** regularly to maintain good oral hygiene.
- **Chew sugar-free, xylitol-sweetened gum.** Chewing stimulates saliva, which helps clean teeth, while xylitol slows the growth of oral bacteria that cause cavities.

Eat, drink and be healthy

- **Choose tooth-friendly foods.** Antioxidants and other nutrients found in fruits, vegetables, legumes and nuts boost your body's ability to fight bacteria and inflammation, helping to protect your teeth and gums. Crisp fruits and raw vegetables like apples, carrots and celery help clean plaque from teeth and freshen breath.
- **Eat a balanced diet every day.** Include vitamin D-rich calcium-fortified juices, milk and other dairy products such as cheeses to strengthen bones and help build enamel.

- **Be mindful of when, how and what you eat.**

Holding foods (such as hard candy) in your mouth or eating foods that take a long time to chew results in longer contact with sugar, which can damage your teeth. Avoid snacking on sugary, carbohydrate-rich or acidic foods throughout the day. Eat these foods only during meal times or drink through a straw to minimize the amount of time your teeth are exposed to sugar and acid.

- **Drink fluoridated water.** Fluoride promotes the rebuilding of minerals in the tooth enamel, resulting in a compound that is harder and more resistant to decay. Public water fluoridation is the most efficient and cost-effective way to prevent cavities according to the American Dental Association (ADA). If you don't drink fluoridated tap water regularly, consider other sources such as fluoride toothpaste or mouth rinses, or ask your dentist about fluoride supplements.

Tired of water? These days, you have so many low or no-sugar choices, such as organic tea, coconut water and coffee. Check out the nutrition label of your beverages and opt for smaller serving sizes. Be sure to limit your intake of sugar to no more than 10% of your total energy and calorie consumption.

Brush and floss regularly

Regular brushing and flossing help protect your teeth from decay and gum disease, which is caused by your mouth's most persistent enemy: plaque. Full of cavity-causing bacteria, plaque is a sticky, colorless film that continually builds up on your teeth.

Brush at least twice a day

Brush your teeth for two to three minutes with fluoridated toothpaste at least twice a day. Even better — brush your teeth after every meal. Keep a toothbrush at work so you can brush after lunch.

What's the best toothbrush?

A good toothbrush:

- Bears the American Dental Association (ADA) stamp of approval (found on the package).
- Has a head that fits easily in your mouth.
- Is labeled “soft,” with round-ended bristles to prevent damage to teeth and gums.

An electric toothbrush may help if you have difficulty brushing your teeth or brushing for a minimum of two minutes, but a regular toothbrush can clean teeth just as well.

How to brush

When you brush, keep the bristles angled against the gumline. Brush along the gumline and the inner and outer surfaces of each tooth. Finish by brushing your tongue, which helps remove bacteria from your mouth.

The truth about toothpaste. Tartar control. Baking soda. Whitening action. Which toothpaste is the most effective? As long as it contains fluoride and has the ADA seal of approval, the toothpaste's brand or extra features really don't matter.

Floss to remove plaque from hard-to-reach areas

Only flossing can remove plaque from between teeth and below the gumline, where decay and gum disease often begin. Floss at least once a day, preferably before bed, to clean the places a toothbrush can't reach.

Conquer gum disease and tooth decay

What is gum disease?

Gum disease is a bacterial infection caused by plaque — a tacky, invisible film that adheres to your teeth. As plaque builds up on teeth, it hardens and becomes tartar, which can be hard to remove.

Plaque irritates the gums and causes inflammation, known as gingivitis. This condition can develop into periodontitis, a severe form of gum disease, in which the gum tissues pull away from the teeth, forming pockets that fill with more plaque. As the disease advances, the pockets grow deeper, and plaque moves further down the tooth root, destroying supporting bone. The affected teeth may loosen and eventually fall out.

Know the signs

To spot gum disease, look for these warning signs:

- Red, tender or swollen gums
- Bleeding gums while brushing or flossing
- Gums that seem to be pulling away from your teeth
- Chronic bad breath or a bad taste in your mouth
- Teeth that are loose or separating from each other

Leading cause of tooth loss. Gum disease is typically slow and painless, so it can easily reach an advanced stage before you're even aware of it. Gum disease — not old age — is the leading cause of about 70% of tooth loss for people in the U.S. In fact, three out of four adults have gum disease during their lifetimes.¹

What causes tooth decay?

When plaque isn't regularly removed, tooth enamel breaks down, causing decay. Decay spreads from the outside toward the center of your tooth. If left untreated, decay may eventually reach the nerve, causing a serious toothache that may require a root canal or tooth extraction.

Protect your smile

Here's how you can fight back!

- **Stop plaque buildup in its tracks.** Help prevent plaque buildup by practicing good oral hygiene with regular brushing and flossing, and visiting your dentist regularly. In addition, watch what and when you eat — avoid prolonged contact with sugars and starches, which can damage your teeth, and get plenty of vitamin C, an essential building block for healthy gums.
- **Expose the enemy.** Plaque is invisible, so another way to fight it is with a disclosing solution that reveals any plaque remaining on your teeth after brushing. Buy a disclosing solution from a drugstore or make your own by mixing two drops of blue or green food coloring with two teaspoons of water.
- **Get early treatment for tooth decay.** When detected early, your dentist can treat decay with fillings. The most common types are metal amalgam and resin-based composite fillings. Metal amalgam fillings are made of silver, tin, copper and mercury blended in a putty-like substance. Resin composite fillings are made of ceramic and plastic compounds, and mimic the appearance of natural teeth.

¹ What Is Gum Disease? <http://www.knowyourteeth.com/infobites/abc/article/?abc=G&iid=324&aid=1251>, Academy of General Dentistry, Nov. 2016.

Dental health for a lifetime

Now that you've learned your dental health ABCs, follow these tips to maintain a healthy smile at any age.

Babies and children

Good oral care begins even before the first tooth appears. During this stage of life:



Clean and massage your baby's gums daily to help establish healthy gums and aid in teething.



Start brushing your child's teeth when the first tooth appears — at about age six months — because teeth are vulnerable to decay as soon as they appear. Begin flossing as soon as your child has two adjacent teeth.



Help children begin brushing their own teeth at age 2. Use a small, soft brush with a pea-sized amount of toothpaste. After age 8, children can brush and floss alone, with an occasional check by an adult.



Guard against baby bottle tooth decay, which can occur when an infant is allowed to sleep with a bottle. Acids produced by bacteria feeding on the juice or milk attack the baby's tooth enamel and can damage the teeth.



Avoid prolonged pacifier use and thumb-sucking, which can change the shape of the roof of the mouth. These habits can also prevent proper growth of the mouth and create problems with tooth alignment. The Academy of General Dentistry (AGD) recommends that children stop using pacifiers by age one.



Consider dental sealants as your child's permanent molars come in. This thin plastic film painted on the chewing surfaces of teeth can prevent cavities. Sealants fill in the teeth's grooves, hardening them and creating a barrier that keeps cavity-causing bacteria out of pits and fissures.

Dental health for a lifetime

Teens

For better oral health, teens should:



Practice good oral hygiene. Maintain a clean, healthy mouth and visit the dentist regularly.



Eat nutritious foods. Select healthy foods such as milk, fruits and vegetables instead of sugary, high-carb foods.



Be smart about tooth whitening. Wait to use tooth-whitening products until at least age 14, when the tooth's pulp (nerve) is fully formed to reduce sensitivity. Always consult a dentist before using an over-the-counter tooth-whitening product.



Take extra care with cleaning while wearing braces. Food and plaque can be trapped in the tiny spaces between braces and wires, causing decay and discoloration. The result can be permanent oral health damage, so regular brushing and flossing are especially important.



Know the dangers of tongue-piercing. Be aware that tongue jewelry can fracture and damage teeth. In some situations, tongue piercings can even result in life-threatening infections.

Dental health for a lifetime

Older adults

To keep smiling brightly through your golden years:



Continue to see your dentist regularly. As you age, your dental needs become increasingly specialized, making regular dentist visits even more vital. Your dentist can check for signs of gum disease and oral cancer.



Watch for medication interactions and changing medical conditions. Many older adults take medications that can adversely interact with dental anesthesia or change oral tissue. Always inform dentists of any changes in medical conditions to prevent potentially harmful drug interactions.



Prevent or treat dry mouth. Some medications can decrease saliva and cause dry mouth. Saliva plays a major role in preventing tooth decay by rinsing away food particles and neutralizing harmful acids. Talk to your dentist about ways to treat dry mouth.

Oral health quiz

Take this quiz and find out how much you know about dental health. Answers are on the next page.

1. How many teeth are in a full set of permanent adult teeth?

- a. 24
- b. 28
- c. 32
- d. 36

2. When should your child first visit the dentist?

- a. at age three
- b. only when your child has a toothache
- c. before your child's first birthday
- d. when your child has more than two teeth

3. At the very least, how much time should you spend brushing your teeth each day?

- a. 30 seconds
- b. 1 minute
- c. 2 minutes
- d. 10 minutes

4. You should brush your teeth vigorously to remove food and plaque.

True or false?

5. How often should you replace your toothbrush?

- a. every 3 weeks
- b. every 3 months
- c. once a year
- d. every 2 years

6. When is the best time to floss?

- a. anytime, as long as you floss at least once a week
- b. morning
- c. midday
- d. before bedtime

7. If your gums bleed when you floss, you should stop flossing until they heal.

True or false?

8. What can you do to cleanse your mouth if you find yourself without a toothbrush or toothpaste after a meal?

- a. chew sugarless gum with xylitol
- b. use a toothpick to remove food particles from teeth
- c. eat a piece of fruit
- d. rinse your mouth with milk

9. How does sugar contribute to tooth decay?

- a. Sugar directly attacks tooth enamel.
- b. Sugar is converted by bacteria into acid, which wears away tooth surfaces.
- c. Sugar doesn't actually contribute to tooth decay; that's a misconception.
- d. Sugar scratches tooth surfaces, allowing bacteria to attack the teeth.

10. What percentage of adults have gum disease during their lifetime?

- a. nearly 15%
- b. nearly 50%
- c. nearly 65%
- d. nearly 80%

Dental health quiz answers

1. **c**
Adults have 32 permanent teeth.
2. **c**
Your child's first visit to the dentist should happen before his or her first birthday. The general rule is six months after the first tooth appears, according to the AGD.
3. **c**
The AGD suggests brushing two to three minutes, twice daily. Most people think they brush for the recommended amount of time but actually brush for less than 30 seconds.
4. **False**
You should brush your teeth gently, applying just enough pressure to feel the bristles against the gums and between the teeth to avoid gum injury and tooth wear (the loss of tooth structure caused by the weakening of dental enamel).
5. **b**
You should change your toothbrush every three months or sooner if it begins to look worn. You should always change your toothbrush after you have been sick.
6. **d**
The best time to floss is before bedtime to remove plaque and food particles that can cause damage overnight. (This is also the reason you should brush your teeth before you go to bed.) However, flossing at least once a day is more important than when it's done.
7. **False**
If you have not been flossing regularly, your gums may bleed at first. As you continue to floss, you will remove the bacteria causing the bleeding.
8. **a**
Although there's no substitute for brushing with fluoride toothpaste, you can vigorously rinse your mouth with water to remove any loose food particles and then chew sugarless gum. Chewing gum stimulates saliva, which washes away food particles and controls bacteria growth.
9. **b**
Bacteria in the mouth feed on sugar and break it down into acid. Acid wears away tooth enamel, causing decay.
10. **d**
According to the AGD, three out of four people have some form of gum disease during their lives.

Want to know more?

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