



Patient Information

Caring for Your Teeth and Gums

Plaque is a sticky film of bacteria that forms continuously on your teeth. The bacteria produce acids when you eat foods or drink beverages that contain sugar or starch. These acids attack the enamel on your teeth, causing your teeth to decay. Plaque can also produce substances that may irritate your gums.

It's important to take care of your teeth and gums because good oral hygiene can help prevent tooth decay, gum disease and bad breath. Plus, good oral hygiene can even help decrease your risk for other serious medical conditions. For example, the bacteria that cause gum disease have been linked to heart disease, diabetes and premature, low-birth-weight babies.

The Proper Way to Brush ...

You should brush at least twice a day so that your teeth and gums stay clean. If you can, also brush your teeth after each meal and snack. Use a toothbrush with soft bristles so that you will not scratch and irritate your teeth or damage gums. Place a small amount of toothpaste on your toothbrush, and follow these steps:

- Place the toothbrush at an angle against your teeth. The bristles of the toothbrush should be touching the tooth and the gumline.
- Move the toothbrush back and forth, using short strokes (about as wide as a tooth).
- Use this method to brush the outer tooth surfaces, inner tooth surfaces and the chewing surfaces of all your teeth.
- Brush your tongue to remove bacteria and freshen breath.
- Brush your teeth for 2 to 3 minutes. Also, be sure to replace your toothbrush every 3 to 4 months.

... and Floss

You also need to floss at least once a day to remove plaque and particles of food that get between your teeth and under your gumline. There are different types of floss — the type that's best for you will depend on how much space you have between your teeth. Follow these steps:

- Break off about 18 inches of floss. Wind most of the floss

around one of your middle fingers and wind the rest of the floss around the middle finger of your other hand. You'll wind the used floss around this finger as the floss gets dirty.

- Hold the floss between your thumbs and index fingers. Use a gentle rubbing motion to place the floss between your teeth. Never snap the floss into the gums.
- When the floss is at the gumline, curve it into a C shape against one tooth. Hold the floss against the side of the tooth and rub the floss against the tooth. The floss should move away from the gum with up and down motions.
- Floss between all your teeth, and remember to floss the back side of the last teeth in your mouth.

The Right Eating Habits

How often you eat, as well as what you eat, affects whether you will have tooth decay. For example, snacking and drinking sugary drinks throughout the day can increase your risk. Hard candies, cough drops and breath mints that are made with sugar increase risk even more, since they dissolve slowly in your mouth.

Eat healthy foods such as dairy products for calcium, vitamin D and phosphorus to build and maintain strong teeth and bones; fruits and vegetables for vitamin C and folic acid to help protect against gum disease; and lean meat, fish, poultry and beans for iron and protein for overall good health and magnesium and zinc for teeth and gums.

Helpful Products

A few products may help in the care of your teeth and gums:

- Interdental cleaning aids are special picks or sticks designed to remove plaque.
- Oral irrigators are devices that direct a stream of water into your mouth to clean areas that are hard to reach. Irrigators are useful for people with braces or fixed partial dentures.
- Mouthwashes help remove food particles, temporarily freshen breath and get rid of bacteria in your mouth.

Some information adapted from the American Dental Association (www.ada.org) and the American Dental Hygienists' Association (www.adha.org).

Additional Notes:
