



Oral Health – Guide to Taking Care of Our Teeth

Teeth are important for eating, smiling, talking and self-esteem. Without teeth, we have trouble chewing our food for digestion, relating to others through facial expressions, and pronouncing words correctly. We may even have difficulty finding a job as employers may be hesitant to hire someone with decayed or missing teeth.

Oral health is important for total body health as it is linked to diabetes, heart disease, stroke, and other chronic illnesses. Some of the earliest signs of cancer, pregnancy complications, immune disorders, hormone imbalances, and drug issues show up in the gums, teeth, and tongue — sometimes long before a person knows anything is wrong. Brushing, flossing, and visiting your dental office regularly can make a big difference between feeling good and having a great smile, or bad breath, bleeding gums, and decayed teeth.

Some people need to take more care of their teeth than others because they are at higher risk for decay or gum disease. People that live in areas without fluoride in their drinking water have more dental decay than those that do. If one or both of your parents have had trouble with dental cavities or gum disease, this increases your risk as well. In addition, if you have not visited a dentist in the past 12 months, your risk of experiencing these problems also increases.

Prevention Is Key!

Prevention is the key to good oral health and we must begin at a young age to prevent the germs (plaque) in our mouths from multiplying and causing cavities and gum disease. The following preventive practices are researched-based and help prevent oral disease:

- Brushing with fluoride toothpaste twice a day
- Using dental floss between teeth once a day
- Visiting the dentist to get cleanings, fluoride, and preventive dental sealants on back teeth
- Reducing sugary snacks and beverages
- Avoiding oral piercings
- Drinking tap water that has fluoride
- Not smoking or using other tobacco products



Brushing and Flossing

Brushing with a fluoride toothpaste twice a day has been proven to be very effective in reducing cavities in the teeth. Using a soft bristled toothbrush, use back and forth or circular strokes near the gum line to clean the plaque away from the gums. Brush all surfaces of each tooth and the chewing surfaces of the back teeth at least twice a day.

Use dental floss once a day to clean between teeth. Wrap string floss around the middle fingers of each hand and use forefinger and thumb to hold the floss. Gently slide the floss between teeth, curve around the side of each tooth; then, use several up and down strokes to clean side surfaces. Floss aids make this easier than using string floss.

Dental Visits

Regular visits to a dentist can help lessen the risk for oral disease. Having a checkup by your dentist and cleanings by your dental hygienist will find any problems early. Getting preventive treatments such as fluorides and dental sealants will protect the teeth against decay. See a dentist at least two times a year.



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Diet

Eating sugary snacks or chewing on sugary gum often throughout the day leads to increased dental cavities. An acid is produced for 20 minutes when we eat foods with sugar. The acid can break down the enamel on a tooth.

Soda pop, especially those with citric acid, can have detrimental effects on the enamel (outer covering) of your teeth. Even diet soda can have a negative effect. The citric acid softens the enamel and can quickly lead to cavities. Sport drinks and other beverages with added sugar, such as flavored lattes and sweetened ice teas, can also have this effect.

Tap Water

Drinking tap water if your water supply is fluoridated will also help prevent cavities. Community water fluoridation has been proven to reduce dental decay by 20-40%. If you have a choice between bottled water and tap water choose tap water. Michigan, for example, has close to 90% of our people on water systems accessing fluoridated water.

Oral Piercings

Oral piercing is a piercing within the mouth or on the lips. It is an especially dangerous type of piercing for a variety of reasons.

- Teeth can be chipped from tongue piercing. It could be minor or severe enough for a root canal or surgery.
- A person can experience increased salivation, or drooling.
- Gum tissue damage can occur requiring surgery or tooth removal.
- A person can have damage to nerves causing a loss of feeling in the tongue.
- Some people have allergic reactions to metal jewelry.
- Choking on or swallowing metal jewelry pieces is possible if jewelry pieces become detached.
- There is the potential for infection due to increased bacterial levels in the mouth.
- If swelling is severe, a person may be unable to breathe, speak, chew, and swallow properly.

Tobacco Products

Smoking or using other tobacco products not only causes unsightly staining on the teeth it can also lead to oral cancer. The heat from the smoke or toxic irritations from chewing tobacco or other tobacco products can have long lasting ill effects on the mouth. The highest risk for developing periodontal disease is the use of tobacco products.