



Dental Care

Step-by-Step Health Plan

The American Dental Association has narrowed down the four things you must do to maintain good dental health. Brushing and flossing is important, but that's just the beginning of your journey to a healthier mouth.

The best dental hygiene relies on regular attention with the right tools, a recommended diet to strengthen teeth and regular visits to the dentist. Here's a look.

CONSISTENT BRUSHING

Experts confirm that everyone should brush their teeth at least twice each day, in the morning and at night, in order to get the best results. If you are on a hybrid schedule or can squeeze in a quick trip home, brushing after lunch is even better. But the quality of what you use, in some ways, is as important as keeping this schedule. Use fluoride-enriched toothpaste that's been approved by the Food and Drug Administration. Check your toothbrush often for signs of wear and tear, and discard it if the bristles are beginning to fray. No matter what, replace your toothbrush every three to four months.



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DAILY FLOSSING

Floss your teeth or use a related interdental cleaner at least once a day. Regular brushing is important, but can't reach into some tucked away places in between teeth. Germs hide in these tight spaces between teeth and your gums, creating a breeding ground that can lead to huge dental issues later on down the road. The regular removal of small food parti-

cles and plaque helps ward off tooth decay.

HEALTHY DIET

Those who brush and floss regularly may still be at risk of cavities, depending on what you eat — and even when. Limit snacks between meals as much as possible, since the American Dental Association notes that many of these snacks are sugary — and most people don't brush or floss

afterward. Cavity-causing material can be left behind, and often at a far higher rate than with a well-balanced meal. High sugar drinks can also contribute to bacteria growth and the breaking down of the tooth surface.

REGULAR VISITS TO YOUR DENTIST

There's still one more required step on your way to a healthier mouth: visit the den-

tist. These experts on oral health can help with early identification of issues like tooth decay and gum disease, while providing timely preventative advice and care. Plus a professional deep cleaning reaches places even a toothbrush and floss can't. You'll ultimately save money and time, since these visual exams and X-rays keep minor issues from unwittingly evolving into major ones.

Combating Dental Erosion

What you do between dental visits can make all the difference. Things we eat and drink have a direct daily impact on enamel.

This daily onslaught begins to wear down the outer shell of our teeth, which protects the more sensitive dentin found beneath. As the enamel erodes, teeth begin to appear yellow or stained — since dentin isn't as white as the outer shell.

What can we do? The Oral Health Foundation has created a checklist of things to watch out for when combating dental erosion:

ROOT CAUSES

Our tooth enamel briefly softens each time we ingest something that's acidic. Saliva works to balance the mouth's acidity, and the outer tooth then returns to its normal state. Erosion occurs when we ingest these acidic things too often, or when your mouth hasn't yet had the time to protect itself once more. Small amounts of enamel can then be brushed, chewed or washed away.

WHEN YOU'RE EATING

Eat fruit instead of drinking fruit juice, and eat fruit with a meal rather than as a snack. Drink water as you eat acidic foods or after drinking acidic



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liquids. Wait an hour or so after eating something acidic before brushing your teeth. If you can't slip away in a timely fashion, consider sugar-free gum since it will encourage the production of saliva until you make time to brush.

WHEN YOU'RE DRINKING

When drinking acidic

things like coffee, tea, wine or soft drinks, use a straw to help the liquid reach the back of your mouth without coming into contact with teeth. Avoid swishing these liquids around in your mouth. If you're not lactose intolerant, finish meals with a selection of cheese or a glass of milk in order to balance the acidity in

your mouth.

TREATMENT OPTIONS

Smaller instances of erosion may be addressed by your dentist with a small filling or other protective application. In more advanced cases, a cap or veneer could be needed in order to replace the damaged tooth. Regular check-ups can

keep the problem from reaching that point, since your dentist is there to offer timely professional care. But this actually makes it even more important that anyone who thinks they're suffering from dental erosion seek out professional advice as early as possible so the problem can be identified and potentially corrected.

Overcoming Fear of the Dentist

Some 40 million Americans don't take advantage of this critical health service. They most often cite anxiety and fear over the process, according to the American Dental Association.

But these trusted professionals are on hand to ensure your well-being through dental health. By putting off critical appointments, examinations and procedures, you're ensuring worse outcomes — and ironically enough, the likelihood of a lot more trips to the dentist so corrective measures can be taken.

Here's how to deal with whatever lingering fears you may have.

HAVE OPEN DISCUSSIONS

As with many anxieties, the best approach to overcoming worry about going to the dentist is to confront your fears head on. Forging a better relationship with your dentist, as well as the hygienist and the rest of their staff, will help personalize the experience. You'll build trust as you get to know the folks who actually conduct these exams, cleanings and any needed procedures.

Be honest about your fears, so that they can be addressed before getting started.



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Creating a comforting so-called “bedside manner” is part of a dentist’s training, just as with any other doctor’s. If you go through a process of getting to know them better, and still feel lingering uncertainty, then it may be time to begin looking for another dentist.

BEFORE YOU GO

Ask friends and family for

their recommendation, with a focus on your particular worries. Once you settle on a dentist, think about the timing. If possible, schedule your visit for a period when time isn't an overriding concern, since that can be a pressure point too. For instance, you will probably need a larger window than the average lunch break or the hour before work begins. Avoid

caffeine prior your appointment, since this stimulant can make you feel anxious. On the other hand, high-protein foods can have a calming impact.

DURING YOUR VISIT

There are also soothing approaches to your visit that can help ease any lingering worries. Breathe regularly, slowly and deeply during den-

tal procedures, both to help along the flow of oxygen but also to lower your heart rate and tendency to panic. Worried about what you might see? In some cases, you may be allowed to listen to a favorite podcast or playlist through your earbuds. Sit back and lose yourself. Offices may have television programming that could provide a distraction, as well.

Why It's Important To Floss

Even regularly brushing can't get to certain hard-to-reach places. Recommended once-a-day flossing can happen before or after brushing.

Recent polling found that a little over half of respondents chose to floss beforehand, while the rest did so afterward. The American Dental Association has confirmed that it doesn't really matter – as long as you are flossing.

WHY IT'S IMPORTANT

Flossing is your best defense against dental issues in tight, out-of-the-way spots where your toothbrush simply can't go. You'll be reducing your chances for cavities, removing plaque from below the gum line that can develop into tartar, and helping to prevent gingivitis – which can progress into gum disease. The problem many have is making time for flossing during a busy day. Taking care of your dental health may require waking up a little earlier, or staying up a little later – or perhaps even bringing floss to work so that you can handle this important chore during your lunch break. These small efforts will make a big difference in the long run.

HOW TO DO IT

Only about half of Americans regularly floss,



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according to the American Dental Association, and many of those who do floss are not taking the proper approach to ensure good dental health. Here's the proper way to do it: Pull out a large section of floss – 18 or more inches – so that you can wind it around fingers on each hand. Gently guide

the string between your teeth, making sure to floss between all of them. Hold the floss against your teeth tightly, rubbing the sides while moving the floss away from the gums.

TEACHING LITTLE ONES

Once you've become a flossing pro, pass this important

habit on to your children, nieces or nephews and younger cousins. In some cases, you might even be the first person to pass along the importance of flossing as well as a brushing their teeth. Parents or guardians should handle flossing in their earliest years, helping out until they develop

their own good habits. The generally assumed age is 10, because that's when kids have usually developed the needed dexterity. Reassure them that it's not painful, while discussing the health benefits. If they are feeling pain while flossing – or if you are – slow down and take it easy.

Sensitive Teeth?

Sensitivity can actually be an indicator of other serious dental issues. Do you have trouble eating or drinking very warm or cold things?

It may be more than a simple inconvenience. Those sensations can serve as early signals for tooth decay, exposed areas caused by gum disease or worn enamel.

Some of these issues may be visible to the untrained eye, but more often a dental professional will be needed to provide a determination and action plan for those who are suffering.

PROTECTIVE LAYERS

Enamel covers the top of our teeth, and it's one of the strongest elements of our body. It can be worn down, however, with poor dental hygiene and/or an overabundance of acidic foods and drinks. As the outer tooth deteriorates, the lower layers of dentin are exposed. (At the root level, a layer of cementum is also present.) Dentin is dotted with a series of small tubes, which potentially allow cold and heat to enter the interior where it can reach nerve endings.

Understanding what's sensitive to your teeth is the first step to finding relief, since in some cases the issue can be



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easily avoided.

PREVENTATIVE MEASURES

If you don't have sensitive teeth, work to keep it that way by brushing gently. Going about this chore too aggressively can cause a weakening of enamel, which leads to discoloration, tooth decay and tooth sensitivity. It can also

lead to problems with your gums. If you already suffer from this condition, avoid acidic foods and drinks. That includes soft drinks, citrus fruits, wine, even some yogurt. If you enjoy these things without too much pain, wait to brush – or drink milk to rebalance the acidity in your mouth. Brushing too soon can erode the enamel.

Experts also suggest rinsing with warm water.

IF YOU NEED TREATMENT

Ask the dentist about treatment for your particular level of teeth sensitivity during your regularly scheduled check-up. Their approach will be dictated by how much pain you're in, and other elements

of your general oral health. In some cases, you may be instructed to seek out over-the-counter toothpaste that addresses the condition. Applying fluoride directly to teeth can strengthen them. There are recommended pain reduction therapies, too. In the most serious of cases, doctors may recommend a gum graft or root canal.

Managing Wisdom Teeth

A new set of teeth emerge long after the last baby teeth have fallen out. If there's isn't room beside existing permanent teeth, they can cause big problems.

If you're lucky, wisdom teeth are no issue at all. Sometimes, however, previously straight teeth may be crowded forward. You may also experience jaw pain and headaches as the overcrowding worsens.

If they are misaligned or haven't completely broken through the gum surface, wisdom teeth may allow bacteria to collect — creating a perfect atmosphere for cavities or infection. They may hinder flossing. Impacted wisdom teeth can also develop cysts, which may damage the roots of neighboring teeth.

WHAT THEY ARE

Wisdom teeth arrive in the late teens and early 20s, well after permanent teeth have replaced those of our childhood. They're believed to have been necessary in earlier eras because our ancestors ate things that were more difficult to chew. X-rays at the dentist's office will chart the emergence of these extra back teeth, while also providing key information on moving forward. If you have room in your mouth, there may be no



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discomfort whatsoever. Others may need to have them removed, a process that is complicated if the teeth are coming in at an angle. Doctors will also be on the lookout for infection or related health issues.

DOING AN EXTRACTION

Removing your wisdom teeth will take one or two out-

patient visits, depending on the positioning of your teeth. If an infection is present, a round of antibiotics may be required before surgery. The process will involve a general anesthetic, so you may be asked not to drink or eat beforehand. Doctors will open up the area and remove the teeth, then close up the area. Patients wake up a little later,

then are released.

MOVING INTO RECOVERY

The dentist will give you specific instructions on what to do after having your wisdom teeth extracted. Follow it all closely, or you may have to return for more treatment. You'll typically be asked to bite down on surgical gauze

and then periodically change the pad. Soft foods like pudding or soups that aren't too spicy will be recommended until the stitches dissolve behind your permanent teeth. Avoid crunchy foods like peanuts or chips, since they can re-open your surgical wounds. Some forms of physical activity may also promote bleeding.

When To See A Periodontist

If you have advanced gum disease, the dentist may recommend this specialist. But what's the definition of periodontitis — and what exactly do they do?

Your dentist will discuss whether your particular situation requires specialized treatments, implants and other procedures that aren't necessarily available at his office. If so, then you may need to see someone who is more experienced in periodontal disease, and has the necessary training, equipment and experience to help solve your issue.

DEFINING PERIODONTITIS

If it goes untreated, gingivitis can advance into a diagnosis of periodontitis as plaque grows unseen and unchecked below the gum line. Sufferers experience a chronic inflammation response as the bacteria in plaque irritates the gums. Over time, the gums and then the bones that support teeth begin to gradually deteriorate. As the gums separate from the teeth, pockets form that then also foster infection. The pockets continue to deepen, destroying more gum and bone, until the teeth can become loose and then fall out. Replacement options



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are then needed.

DIFFERENT KINDS

Be on the lookout for gums that bleed when you regularly brush or floss, changes in the position of your teeth, receding gums or loose teeth, bad breath, tender or swollen gums, and pain when you eat. As you're being evaluated, doctors will discuss the four stages of gum disease: Gingivitis, which involves gum

inflammation without loss of bone, then initial periodontitis, mild periodontitis and progressive periodontitis.

When the situation becomes chronic, that means dentists have consistently identified inflammation in the supporting tissues around our teeth, coupled with progressive detachment and early bone loss. This form of periodontitis can be associated with heart disease, diabetes

and various respiratory problems. Aggressive periodontitis happens to patients who are otherwise healthy, according to the American Academy of Periodontology. They suffer rapid loss of attachment and bone destruction, but without other underlying issues.

HOW PERIODONTISTS CAN HELP

These specialists are specially trained in diagnosing, pre-

venting and treating these serious issues with our gums. In the earliest stages, they may simply scale, root plane or provide a debridement on a regular basis to remove plaque that toothbrushes and flossing can't reach. Surgical procedures follow for those with more advanced cases. The services needed, up to and including removal of the teeth, depend entirely on the amount of damage that's already occurred.