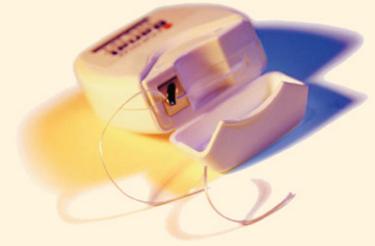


Guide to flossing

- ◆ Why do we need to floss?
- ◆ What types of floss are there?
- ◆ Flossing technique and oral care tips



The importance of flossing

Plaque is a sticky film on teeth that contains masses of germs. Some of the germs cause **tooth decay**, while others cause **gum diseases**. But both conditions are preventable.

Gum diseases can be “silent”: they may not cause any pain, but they are progressive and, left untreated, can be serious. For example, **periodontitis** is a gum disease in which gums gradually shrink away from teeth, and ligament attachment and bone are lost; without treatment, this can lead to tooth loss.

Brushing teeth on all sides and along the gumline removes most food remnants and plaque, but brushing cannot effectively clean adjacent tooth surfaces where neighbouring teeth face each other and meet the gums. **Flossing** is an important part of the daily oral hygiene routine and helps us properly clean those areas of our teeth. However, a 2011 Hong Kong study showed only about 12% of adults flossed their teeth every day but not always effectively, and more than 99% of adults had varying degrees of gum disease.

Types of floss

Floss is a special nylon or plastic thread, available at supermarkets and drug stores/pharmacies/chemists. Floss can be waxed or unwaxed; flavoured or unflavoured; regular, wide, or flat; white, colourless, or coloured. All types, **when used correctly and consistently**, can remove plaque from between teeth and below the gum line. If you have trouble flossing, ask your dentist or dental hygienist for advice (a floss holder may help, and large gaps may need interdental brushes).

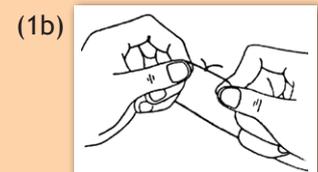
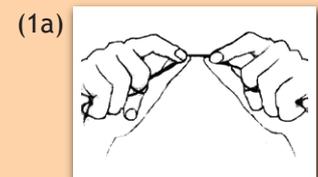
Flossing technique

(1a) Wrap a length of floss (30-35 cm) around each middle finger, or (1b) first make a double-knot to tie the floss into a circle and hold it with both hands. Hold about 3 cm of floss between the first finger and thumb of each hand, and **gently slide it between two teeth**; do not snap it into place.

(2) With the floss forming a **C-shape** around the side of one tooth, move the floss **gently up and down**, **against the side of the tooth**, making sure you reach below the gum line. Repeat for each tooth, including the backteeth, using a new part of the floss each time. After flossing, rinse your mouth and wash your hands. For demonstration videos, see <www.toothclub.gov.hk>.

Note: Ordinary toothpicks cannot clean teeth like floss does, and may injure gums if used improperly.

Flossing technique



Oral care tips

- **Do not smoke** or use tobacco. If you smoke, call the Hong Kong Department of Health Smoking Cessation Hotline (2961 8883) or visit <www.tobaccocontrol.gov.hk> for advice on quitting.
- **Have a balanced diet** and be sure to eat fruits and vegetables every day, all year round.
- **Brush your teeth twice a day** with a fluoride toothpaste and **clean between teeth every day by flossing**.
- **Visit your dentist regularly**, and especially if your gums persistently bleed when you brush your teeth; if they are red, swollen, or tender; or if they have pulled away from the teeth.

Sources: HK Department of Health Love Teeth Campaign, <www.toothclub.gov.hk/en/teeth.html>; Hong Kong Society of Periodontology, <www.webguruasia.com/hkperio>; American Academy of Periodontology, <www.perio.org>.

Written by Trevor Lane, DPhil; edited by Esmonde Corbet, FHKAM (Dent Surg), FCDSHK (Perio), and Li-jian Jin, PhD, Odont Dr. This Patient Page is for general informational use and is not a substitute for diagnosis; for specific advice, please consult a dentist, who may in turn ask you to see a dental hygienist.