Guide to oral hygiene

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♦ When should I see a dentist?

Why is oral hygiene important?

Microbes (mainly bacteria) that collect around teeth and gums become a thin sticky layer or ‘biofilm’ called plaque on the surface of teeth. These microbes convert sugars and starches from food and drink into acids, which—along with acidic food and drink—dissolve the surface of teeth.

Saliva offers some protection, but plaque and food debris need to be physically and regularly removed by a good oral hygiene routine. Poor oral hygiene and frequent acid attack due to snacking will cause tooth decay. In addition, plaque build-up at and below the gumline can lead to gum disease, which may lead to bone loss and eventually tooth loss.

Oral hygiene tips

- Brush teeth twice a day with a fluoride toothpaste, brushing plaque away from the gums (brushing should last a total of 3-4 minutes—about the length of a song on the radio)
- Floss between all teeth once a day
- Change your toothbrush regularly

Other tips for a healthy mouth

- Limit the frequency of snacking, especially of sugary and acidic food and drink
- Never dip babies’ dummies (pacifiers) in honey, fruit juice, or syrup; don’t leave a baby with a nursing bottle at night
- Have regular dental check-ups; dentists can fill in natural deep grooves on the biting surface of back teeth (fissure sealing) to reduce the chance of decay
- Chew sugarless gum to stimulate saliva flow
- Keep a healthy lifestyle: have enough rest, have a balanced and regular diet, exercise regularly, and do not smoke

Visits should be regular, at least yearly. Your dentist can detect early signs of tooth decay and gum disease, fix problems early, and give advice on how to prevent disease and maintain oral hygiene. You need to see a dentist if you have these:
- Toothache or sensitivity to sweet, hot, or cold food and/or drink
- Visible holes or discoloured spots on teeth
- Receding or bleeding gums, especially when brushing and flossing
- Bad breath (halitosis), which can be due to decaying teeth or periodontitis
- Other problems, such as a mouth injury, a painful jaw, partially emerged (impacted) wisdom teeth, a persistent dry mouth, loose teeth, or teeth grinding (bruxism).


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