



Are you brushing and flossing enough? And in the right way? If not, you don't just risk cavities, but health problems throughout your body. We asked dental health experts for the best ways to protect your smile...

Brushing too hard. Not flossing enough. These are just some of the dental mistakes people make.

Poor dental health doesn't just risk tooth decay. It can increase the risk of everything from gum disease to a heart attack, experts say.

"Most people don't brush or floss often enough – or do many of the other things that keep a mouth healthy," says Lana Rozenberg, D.D.S., a cosmetic dentist in New York, N.Y.

A busy schedule or being extra sleepy before bed is often enough to derail our dental routine. But the biggest problem many of us share is not knowing the best ways to care for our teeth.

Here's how to avoid dental problems and improve your overall health.

1. What's the best way to brush?

Just because your teeth are made of hard enamel, it doesn't mean you should scrub them like you would a dirty pot.

"Scrubbing that's too aggressive or a toothbrush that's too hard can harm gums and tooth enamel," Rozenberg says.

Brush for two minutes every time (half a minute for each quadrant of teeth), and use a soft-bristled toothbrush.

Ideally, you should brush after each meal or snack to quickly remove decay-causing, odor-emitting particles (like food) and bacteria from the tooth's surface.

If that seems impossible, aim for at least twice a day. Not brushing increases risk of cavities, bad breath, tooth decay and bone loss, Rozenberg says.

2. Do I need an electric toothbrush?

Probably not. That basic, soft-bristled toothbrush will work just as well – if you use the right technique, Rozenberg says.

Position your brush at a 45-degree angle to your gums. Move it back and forth across one quadrant in gentle, tooth-wide strokes. Brush the outside, inside and chewing surfaces of each tooth, focusing on one quadrant at a time.

Finish by brushing your tongue to remove the disease- and odor-causing bacteria that hides there.

If you know you won't do all that, invest in an electric toothbrush.

“It gives continuous, effective strokes that clean the tooth surface gently and efficiently,” says Elisa Mello, D.D.S., a cosmetic dentist in New York, N.Y. And some electric brushes have sonic action that can vibrate bacteria out of gum pockets and off the tooth surface.

Plus, most have timers, so you know when you’ve brushed long enough.

Whichever kind of toothbrush you use, replace the brush (or just the bristles, if it’s electric) every 3-4 months.

“Toothbrushes can harbor bacteria, and if bristles are frayed or bent, they won’t clean teeth effectively,” Mello says.

3. With so many toothpaste options, how do I choose?

Tartar control. Whitening. Cavity protection. Toothpaste packages make lots of claims. But do you need them?

Here’s how to decode the label lingo:

* Tartar control. If your teeth build up tartar quickly between dentist visits, this is a good option. But some tartar-control formulas can be too abrasive for teeth. If a toothpaste feels gritty when you rub it between your fingers, stay away, Rozenberg says.

* Whitening. These brighten teeth but won’t bleach them shades lighter. For that, you need whitening strips, trays with bleaching gel, or in-office treatments, such as Zoom 3 and BriteSmile. Ask your dentist which is right for you.

* Sensitive. If you experience irritation or pains when eating or brushing teeth, try a desensitizing toothpaste.

The bottom line: “It’s not what toothpaste you use that matters; it’s your brushing technique,” Rozenberg says.

Your best bet is buying a paste that will make you want to brush.

4. How can I get rid of bad breath?

Bad breath is often a sign of bacteria in your mouth. Odor-causing bacteria can hide in gum tissue, tongue crevices and between teeth.

To stay minty-fresh, you must brush, floss and brush your tongue to get rid of those bacteria – especially in the morning.

“During the day, we swallow about 2,000 times, which flushes out some bacteria. But at night we only swallow about 200 times, which leaves bad bacteria lingering in the mouth,” Rozenberg explains.

Mouthwash also helps remove bacteria, as can the occasional breath strip.

But if bad breath lingers, see your doctor. It can be a sign of diabetes or a larger problem with your digestion, liver, kidney or sinuses, Mello says.

5. Do I really have to floss?

Absolutely. Once a day.

It may feel like a chore, but it’s essential for removing food particles and bacteria trapped between teeth that your toothbrush can’t reach.

If you don’t floss, you risk cavities, tooth decay and inflammation, the last of which can put you at risk for heart attack and stroke, Mello adds.

To get the most out of flossing, do it before you brush. That allows your toothpaste's fluoride to seep in and strengthen enamel between teeth, Rozenberg says. Plus, any plaque you've unearthed gets brushed away.

Here's how to floss effectively:

- * Break off about 18 inches of floss, wind it around your fingers, then guide it gently between teeth.
- * When it reaches the gum line, curve it into a C-shape against one tooth and gently rub it up and down. (Never snap the floss in and out of gums.)
- * Repeat this on every tooth, including the back of the ones in the back of your mouth.

While it's common for gums to bleed if you don't floss regularly, see your dentist if they bleed every time. That may be a sign of infection – or that you need more guidance on proper flossing technique.

6. How can I brighten my teeth?

A yellowed smile doesn't necessarily mean poor dental health. Tooth color is hereditary and affected by what we eat – everything from coffee and soda to berries and wine can stain it.

We associate a bright white smile with health and vibrancy, however, which is probably why whitening is one of the most popular dental procedures.

Though whitening is a popular cosmetic-dental procedure, you can get a brighter smile without a trip to the dentist.

Both professional and at-home teeth whitening products (like whitening strips and trays with bleaching gel) use the same main ingredient: carbamide peroxide, which comes from hydrogen peroxide.

The difference: Over-the-counter kits contain a much smaller percentage, so it takes longer to get results, Rozenberg says.

In-office whitening procedures, such as Zoom 3, a 45-minute treatment that uses a special light and prescription-strength bleaching gel to whiten teeth, offer immediate results. But it comes at a cost of \$450-\$750 per treatment. Your cheapest option is making your own tooth whitener, says Laura Torrado, D.D.S., a cosmetic dentist in New York, N.Y.

Combine a tablespoon of baking soda, a pinch of salt, and enough peroxide to turn the mixture into a paste. Brush teeth with this paste for two minutes.

The baking soda and salt are abrasives that remove plaque, and the peroxide will whiten teeth.

7. Should I use mouthwash?

It's not necessary if you're brushing and flossing several times a day, according to Rozenberg, unless you have tooth decay, in which case your dentist may prescribe a fluoride rinse.

But there's no harm in using a mouthwash for fresher breath. Swish it around after flossing and brushing to remove plaque and kill remaining bacteria.

8. Are other dental hygiene products necessary?

If you're taking care of the basics, everything else is just "extra, but it still helps," Rozenberg says.

Here's how to navigate the strange tools in the toothpaste aisle:

* Gum massagers. These tools are available on their own, and you can find them at the end of some toothbrushes. They stimulate gums to toughen up tissue so they won't bleed as easily, says Rozenberg. Massage gums once a day.

* Tongue scrapers. These remove bacteria from the tongue, but a toothbrush does the job just as well. Make sure to scrape daily for best results.

* Interdental brushes. These small pipe-cleaner-looking brushes are bent at a right angle so they move between teeth above the gum. They're ideal for people with areas too difficult to clean with a regular toothbrush and floss, such as bridges.

* Toothpicks. Avoid them. They can traumatize gums, Rozenberg says. Use floss to remove food from between teeth.

9. What can I do about teeth grinding?

Unless a partner complains about your nighttime noises, it's hard to know if you're grinding your teeth when you sleep.

A few clues:

- * Unexplained headaches, especially early morning or late in the day
- * Achy or tired facial muscles when you wake
- * Trouble sleeping
- * Extreme cold sensitivity throughout your mouth
- * A clicking or popping jaw
- * Front teeth seem sharper and chip easily, or have become uneven

Grinding teeth, or bruxing, puts stress on teeth and bone. In addition to the problems listed above, grinding can make teeth and bone recede, opening gums to decay and infection, Mello says.

The most effective treatment is having your dentist fit you for a mouth guard. It can cost up to several hundred dollars, but part may be covered by insurance.