

## Healthy Teeth for Life: 10 Dental Tips for Families



You have so many good reasons to keep your family's teeth and gums healthy. Sparkling smiles. Being able to chew for good nutrition. Avoiding toothaches and discomfort. And new research suggests that gum disease can lead to other problems in the body, including increased risk of heart disease.

Fortunately, there are simple ways to keep teeth strong and healthy from childhood to old age. Here's how:

**1. Start children early.** Despite great strides in decay prevention, one in four young children develops signs of tooth decay before they start school. Half of all children between the ages of 12 and 15 have cavities. "Dental care should begin as soon as a child's first tooth appears, usually around six months," Caryn Solie, RDH, president of the American Dental Hygienists' Association, tells WebMD. "Teeth can be wiped with a clean, damp cloth or a very soft brush. At about age 2, you can let kids try brushing for themselves -- although it's important to supervise."

**2. Seal off trouble.** Permanent molars come in around age 6. Thin protective coatings applied to the chewing surfaces of the back teeth can prevent decay in the pits and fissures. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, sealants can significantly reduce caries. Yet only one in three U.S. kids receives dental sealants. Talk to your dental professional.

**3. Use enough -- but not too much -- fluoride.** The single biggest advance in oral health has been fluoride, which strengthens enamel, making it less likely to decay. Three out of four Americans drink water that is fluoridated. If your water isn't fluoridated, talk to your dental professional, who may suggest putting a fluoride application on your teeth. Many toothpastes and mouth rinses also contain fluoride. Fluoride should be used sparingly in young children -- no more than a pea-sized dab on the toothbrush. Too much can cause white spots on teeth.

**4. Brush twice a day and floss daily.** Gum disease and tooth decay remain big problems -- and not just for older people. Three-fourths of teenagers have gums that bleed, according to the ADHA. Along with the basic advice, remember:

- Toothbrushes should be changed 3 to 4 times a year.
- Patients with braces may need to use special toothbrushes and other oral hygiene tools to brush their teeth. We provide all of our patients with a new toothbrush, interproximal brush, floss, OrthoWash, and other supplies required to maintain a healthy smile.
- Older people with arthritis or other problems may have trouble holding a toothbrush or using floss.
- Some people find it easier to use an electric toothbrush. Others simply put a bicycle grip or foam tube over the handle of a regular toothbrush to make it easier to hold.

**5. Rinse or chew gum after meals.** In addition to brushing and flossing, rinsing your mouth with an antibacterial rinse such as OrthoWash can help prevent decay and gum problems.

**6. Block blows to teeth.** Sports and recreational activities build healthy bodies, but they can pose a threat to teeth. Most school teams now require children to wear mouth guards. But remember: unsupervised

recreational activities like skate-boarding and roller-blading can also result in injuries. Your dentist can make a custom-fitted mouth guard. Another option: buy a mouth guard at a sporting goods store that can be softened using hot water to form fit your mouth.

**7. Don't smoke or use smokeless tobacco.** Tobacco stains teeth and significantly increases the risk of gum disease and oral cancer. If you smoke or use chewing tobacco, consider quitting. Counsel your kids not to start.

**8. Eat smart.** At every age, a healthy diet is essential to healthy teeth and gums. A well-balanced diet of whole foods -- including grains, nuts, fruits and vegetables, and dairy products -- will provide all the nutrients you need. Some researchers believe that omega-3 fats, the kind found in fish, may also reduce inflammation, thereby lowering risk of gum disease, says Anthony M. Lacopino, DMD, PhD, dean of the University of Manitoba Faculty of Dentistry.

**9. Avoid sugary foods.** When bacteria in the mouth break down simple sugars, they produce acids that can erode tooth enamel, opening the door to decay. "Sugary drinks, including soft drinks and fruit drinks, pose a special threat because people tend to sip them, raising acid levels over a long period of time," says Steven E. Schonfeld, DDS, PhD, a dentist in private practice and spokesperson for the American Dental Association. "Carbonated drinks may make matters worse, since carbonation also increases acidity." Sticky candy is another culprit, because the sugars linger on teeth surfaces.

**10. Make an appointment.** Most experts recommend a dental check-up every 6 months -- more often if you have problems like gum disease. During a routine exam, your dentist or dental hygienist removes plaque build-up that you can't brush or floss away and look for signs of decay. A regular dental exam also spots:

- **Early signs of oral cancer.** Nine out of 10 cases of oral cancer can be treated if found early enough. Undetected, oral cancer can spread to other parts of the body and become harder to treat.
- **Wear and tear from tooth grinding.** Called bruxism, teeth grinding may be caused by stress or anxiety. Over time, it can wear down the biting surfaces of teeth, making them more susceptible to decay. If your teeth show signs of bruxism, your dentist may recommend a mouth guard worn at night to prevent grinding.
- **Signs of gum disease.** Gum disease, also called gingivitis or periodontitis, is the leading cause of tooth loss in older people. "Unfortunately, by the time most people notice any of the warning signs of periodontitis, it's too late to reverse the damage," says Sam Low, DDS, professor of periodontology at the University of Florida and president of the American Academy of Periodontology. Periodically, your dental professional should examine your gums for signs of trouble.

"Almost all tooth decay and most gum disease can be prevented with good oral hygiene," says Solie. "We're talking about taking a few minutes each day to brush and floss. That's not a lot in return for a lifetime of healthy teeth and gums."

*Source: WebMD*

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