

Back to Basics

DENTAL DECAY AND PERIODONTAL DISEASE arise from dental plaque which accumulates on the teeth and below the gumline. So it stands to reason then that the ability to control the accumulation of plaque is the most important element in preventing dental disease.

Dental plaque is a sticky film which is composed mainly of a colony of bacteria. The bacteria produce acids which create pits within the enamel which causes what we call dental caries. In addition, our immune system's response to these bacteria causes bone loss which is what we call periodontal disease.

Oral hygiene is the practice of keeping the mouth and teeth clean to prevent dental problems and "Halitosis" (bad breath.) Good oral hygiene is accomplished by brushing, cleaning between your teeth, tongue cleaning, and oral irrigation.

Being able to brush your teeth effectively is a combination of selecting the right toothbrush and toothpaste and then using them correctly. It is recommended to use a toothbrush that has a small head and very soft bristles. The smaller head design brush seems to allow greater accessibility to the back teeth. It is known that toothbrushes with stiff bristles are traumatic to the gingiva and tend to cause gingival recession, a process called toothbrush abrasion.

The type of toothpaste one uses is also important. In general, you should be using a low abrasive paste with fluoride. Highly abrasive pastes such as whitening and tartar control toothpastes can actually wear away at the enamel and root surface creating grooves. Low abrasive pastes are typically sensitive formulated pastes. Fluoride is an important component as it is known to make the enamel of the teeth harder. There are prescription fluoride toothpastes for those that are more prone to decay.

Most people do not brush long enough. Studies have shown that a minimum brushing time of two minutes is needed to thoroughly clean the

teeth. Some of the powered brushes like Sonicare and Oral B have two-minute timers built in to help brush for the right amount of time. If you do not have a powered brush, using a kitchen timer can be useful. Each aspect of the tooth must be brushed, so bristle placement is important. The gum line also needs to be brushed to remove the plaque which causes gum disease. Lastly, avoid pressing too hard on the brush. It is best to use short gentle circular strokes at the gum line to prevent damage.

Let's talk flossing. Periodontal disease is more prevalent between your teeth so removing plaque here is very important. The correct method to floss is to start with about 18 inches of floss, wind most of the floss around each middle finger, leaving an inch or two of floss to work with. Holding the floss tautly between your thumbs and index fingers, slide it gently up-and-down between your teeth. Gently curve the floss around the base of each tooth, making sure you go beneath the gumline. Never snap or force the floss, as this may cut or bruise delicate gum tissue.

There are other aids available to clean between teeth, specifically interdental brushes. Piksters™ is one brand that works well as they have a range of sizes to get between teeth. Some studies find that brushes like these are easier to use and they can be more effective than flossing.

How about your tongue? The tongue can harbor bacteria, fungus, food debris, and dead cells all which contribute to bad breath. A tongue brush or scraper is preferred over a toothbrush to keep the tongue clean.

Oral irrigators use a forceful stream of water to clean the teeth. They do not substitute for brushing and flossing but they are an adjunct to flush food debris away from the teeth. They can be very useful for people that have braces or bridges where floss can not be passed between the teeth.


Removing plaque is the key to good dental health. Get back to the basics of good oral hygiene and it will lead to problem-free dental checkups. 

PHOTO: THOMAS BALSAMO



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