

Oral health: Brush up on dental care basics

Think you know everything about proper brushing and flossing techniques? Understand the basics and what you can do to promote oral health.

[By Mayo Clinic staff](#)

Your smile depends on simple dental care habits, such as brushing and flossing. But are you using the right techniques? Follow these steps to protect your oral health.

Brushing for oral health

Oral health begins with clean teeth. Consider these brushing basics from the American Dental Association:

Brush your teeth at least twice a day. When you brush, don't rush. Take enough time to do a thorough job.

Use the proper equipment. Use a fluoride toothpaste and a soft-bristled toothbrush that fits your mouth comfortably. Consider using an electric or battery-operated toothbrush, especially if you have arthritis or other problems that make it difficult to brush effectively.

Practice good technique. Hold your toothbrush at a slight angle against your teeth and brush with short back-and-forth motions. Remember to brush the inside and chewing surfaces of your teeth, as well as your tongue. Avoid vigorous or harsh scrubbing, which can irritate your gums.

Keep your equipment clean. Always rinse your toothbrush with water after brushing. Store your toothbrush in an upright position, if possible, and allow it to air dry until using it again. Don't routinely cover toothbrushes or store them in closed containers, which can encourage the growth of bacteria.

Know when to replace your toothbrush. Invest in a new toothbrush or a replacement head for your electric or battery-operated toothbrush every three to four months — or sooner if the bristles become frayed.

Flossing for oral health

You can't reach the tight spaces between your teeth or under your gumline with a toothbrush. That's why daily flossing is important. When you floss:

Don't skimp. Break off about 18 inches (46 centimeters) of dental floss. Wind most of the floss around the middle finger on one hand, and the rest around the middle finger

on the other hand — leaving about 1 inch (3 centimeters) to floss your first tooth.

Take it one tooth at a time. Use your thumbs and forefingers to gently pull the floss from the gumline to the top of the tooth to scrape off plaque. Rub the floss against all sides of the tooth. Unwind to fresh floss as you progress to the next tooth.

Keep it up. If you have trouble getting floss through your teeth, try the waxed variety. If it's hard to manipulate the floss, use a floss holder or an interdental cleaner — such as a dental pick or stick designed to clean between the teeth.

Other oral health care tips

In addition to daily brushing and flossing, consider using an antimicrobial mouth rinse to help reduce plaque between your teeth.

To remove food particles from your teeth, you might try an oral irrigator — a device that aims a stream of water at your teeth. Resist the temptation to use toothpicks or other objects that could injure your gums. Keep in mind, however, that an oral irrigator doesn't replace daily brushing and flossing, since it doesn't remove plaque.

When to see the dentist

To prevent gum disease and other oral health problems, schedule regular dental cleanings and exams — generally once or twice a year. In the meantime, contact your dentist if you notice any signs or symptoms that could suggest oral health problems, such as:

- Red, tender or swollen gums
- Gums that bleed when you brush or floss
- Gums that begin pulling away from your teeth
- Loose permanent teeth
- Changes in the way your top and bottom teeth align with each other
- Unusual sensitivity to hot and cold
- Persistent bad breath or an unusual taste in your mouth

Remember, early detection and treatment of problems with your gums, teeth and mouth can help ensure a lifetime of good oral health.
