

Game plan for healthy teeth



Teeth are meant to last a lifetime — and they can. You just have to know how to beat tooth decay and gum disease at their own game.

THE PLAYERS

Toothbrush

Remember when the only difference between toothbrushes was color? Now you can choose from angled necks, narrowed heads, staggered bristles — how do you know which is best for you?

Your toothbrush should bear the American Dental Association (ADA) stamp of approval (found on the package). It should also be labeled “soft” and have round-ended bristles, which means it’s sturdy enough to clean teeth and stimulate gums, but not scour them.

An electric toothbrush may help those who have difficulty brushing their teeth, although it’s not proven to clean better than a regular toothbrush. And, remember, your toothbrush gets a daily workout — replace it every two to three months, as well as after colds, to keep it in top shape.

Toothpaste

The ingredients in your toothpaste form a powerful defense, with fluoride as your number one cavity fighter (see following description). Toothpaste also contains abrasives. Designed to clean and polish teeth, abrasives include silica, alumina, calcium or low levels of baking soda. If a paste is too abrasive, however, it may damage teeth, creating a place for bacteria to accumulate.

Many toothpastes boast anti-plaque or tartar-control abilities. While plaque can be brushed away, toothpaste manufacturers must prove to the ADA that their paste prevents gingivitis in order to make a claim to fighting plaque. Tartar, on the other hand, can only be removed by a dental professional. Tartar-control toothpastes won’t defeat existing tartar, but do help prevent further buildup.

Whitening agents may extend the brightness your teeth have after a professional cleaning. However, be aware of the effects of hydrogen peroxide, the active ingredient in many whiteners, which may damage gums or tooth enamel. Ask your dentist before whitening at home.

Fluoride

Fluoride helps teeth retain calcium, which keeps them strong and slows the production of acids that attack teeth. Unfortunately, much of the country’s water supply still does not contain fluoride, and more people today are drinking bottled water or using in-home filtration systems, further reducing fluoride intake. Use a fluoride toothpaste and consider a fluoride mouth rinse, which not only helps fight cavities, especially at the gum line, but also strengthens teeth.

Floss

Waxed, unwaxed, plain, mint, cinnamon — which floss you choose is up to you, as long as you use it correctly and regularly. Rather than leaving floss on the sidelines, try a floss holder or specially designed pick, which can help those who find floss difficult to work with.



THE OPPOSITION

Plaque

Your biggest rival is plaque — the sticky, colorless film that builds up on your teeth every day. Because it's invisible, you should periodically use what's known as a “disclosing solution” to see if you are brushing and flossing effectively. Swish the solution around in your mouth, spit, then rinse with water. The color stays on your teeth where plaque exists, appearing darker where plaque is thickest.

Disclosing solutions can be bought at a drugstore, or you can make your own by mixing two drops of blue or green food coloring with two teaspoons of water.

Tartar

Tartar is the hard deposit on your teeth that only a dentist can remove. It occurs over time as plaque combines with the minerals in saliva.

Decay

The unwelcome successor to plaque and tartar is decay. When you eat, the bacteria in plaque transform the sugars and starches in food to acids. Each time acid is produced, it attacks the tooth enamel for about 20 minutes. If plaque is not removed regularly, the enamel breaks down, and the teeth eventually decay.

Decay works from the outside toward the center of the tooth. If untreated, decay reaches the tooth pulp and forms an abscess at the root end (usually causing tremendous pain). At this stage, a root canal or extraction is necessary.

Diet

You may be surprised to learn that food can be an opponent, too. It depends on the types of foods you eat, how often and the length of time the foods remain in your mouth.

Like most people, you probably eat your share of sugar-laden snacks and drinks. Sugar in any form, including brown sugar and the natural sugars found in fruit and dairy products, is a tooth's worst enemy. Starchy foods are also suspect and should be eaten only as part of a meal. Foods such as candy and fruits tend to stick to the teeth, enhancing the conditions for destructive acids. Hard candies, breath mints and cough drops also stay in the mouth longer than other foods. The more often you snack, the greater your risk for hosting enamel-destroying acids.

The good news is that some foods may actually help counter tooth decay. Research has shown that peanuts and aged cheddar, Swiss and Monterey Jack cheeses may actually inhibit or neutralize the acids that cause cavities.

Brushing after meals and snacks is essential and, combined with a balanced diet, will help beat disease and decay at their own game and ensure strong teeth and gums.



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