

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.

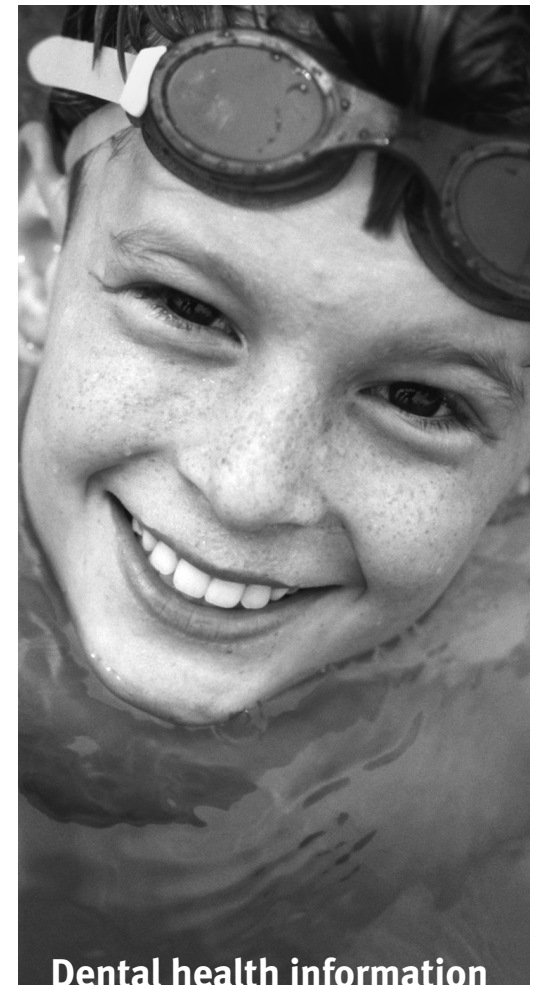


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Game plan for
healthy teeth



Dental health information
you can trust

THE PLAYERS

● Toothbrush

Your toothbrush should have the American Dental Association (ADA) seal on the package. It should be soft, easy to hold and fit into your mouth with ease.

An electric toothbrush may help those who have trouble brushing their teeth, even though it's not proven to clean better than a regular toothbrush. And, keep in mind, your toothbrush gets a daily workout — buy a new one every three to four months, as well as after colds, to keep it in top shape.

● Toothpaste

Today, you can buy toothpaste in tubes and pumps, for children and adults. There's mint, orange and bubble gum flavors. Many types of toothpaste have anti-plaque or tartar control abilities. While plaque can be brushed away, tartar can only be removed by a dental expert. Tartar control toothpastes won't defeat existing tartar, but do help stop more buildup.

Designed to clean and polish, toothpastes with the ADA seal also have fluoride in them to help prevent tooth decay. Toothpastes that don't have the ADA seal on them may be too coarse and harm your teeth, creating a place for germs to build up.

● Fluoride

Fluoride helps teeth hold on to calcium, which keeps them strong. Use fluoride toothpaste, and think about a fluoride mouth wash, which not only helps fight cavities but also makes teeth strong. Check with your dentist to see if your child should take fluoride supplements.

● Floss

A toothbrush can't reach all the spots in which plaque can hide. Waxed, unwaxed, plain, mint or tape form — which floss you choose is up to you, as long as you use it right and often. Try using a floss holder or floss pick, which helps those who find floss hard to work with.

THE ENEMY

● Plaque

Your biggest enemy is plaque — the layer of film that builds up on your teeth every day. You should try using what's known as a "disclosing solution" to see if you're brushing and flossing well. Swish the solution around in your mouth, spit, then rinse with water. The color stays on your teeth where plaque has not been brushed off, appearing darker where plaque is thickest. Disclosing solutions can be bought at a store, or you can make your own by mixing two drops of blue or green food coloring with two teaspoons of water. Try doing this every 2-3 months to help you find the areas in your mouth where you need to do a better job.

● Tartar

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

● Decay

When you eat, the germs in plaque change the sugars and starches in food to acids. Each time acid is formed, it attacks the tooth enamel for about 20 minutes. If plaque is not removed on a regular basis, the enamel breaks down and the teeth will decay.

Decay works from the outside toward the inside of the tooth. If you don't have your cavity taken care of when it's small, it will grow until it reaches the inside of the tooth and form a blister at the root end (usually causing extreme pain). At this stage, a root canal or pulling out the tooth is needed.

● Diet

Certain foods can be enemies too, depending on the types of foods you eat, how often and how long the food stays in your mouth.

Like most people, you probably eat your share of sugary snacks and drinks. Sugar, in any form, is a tooth's worst enemy. Starchy foods are also not good for your teeth and should be eaten only as part of a meal. Foods such as raisins, fun fruits, hard candies, breath mints, chewing gum and cough drops tend to stick to the teeth much longer than other foods, raising the risk for tooth decay. The more often you snack, the larger your risks for tooth decay.

The good news is that some foods may really help counter tooth decay. Studies have shown that peanuts and aged Cheddar, Swiss and Monterey Jack cheeses may in fact slow down or stop the acids that cause cavities.