

## **Why are my teeth so important?**

Your teeth vary in shape and size depending on their position within your mouth. These differences allow the teeth to do many different jobs. Teeth help us to chew and digest food. They help us to talk, and to pronounce different sounds clearly. Finally, teeth help to give our face its shape. A healthy smile can be a great asset and because this is so important, it makes sense to give your teeth the best care possible.

## **How do I keep my teeth and gums healthy?**

It is easy to get your mouth clean and healthy, and keep it that way. A simple routine of brushing and cleaning between the teeth, good eating habits and regular dental check-ups can help prevent most dental problems. Although most people brush regularly, many don't clean between their teeth and some people don't have dental check-ups. A few small changes in your daily routine can make a big difference in the long run. Your dentist or dental hygienist can remove any build-up on your teeth and treat any gum disease that has already appeared. But daily dental care is up to you, and the main weapons are the toothbrush and interdental cleaning. (Cleaning between the teeth).

## **What is plaque?**

Plaque is a thin, sticky film of bacteria that constantly forms on your teeth. The plaque reacts with food, turning sugar into acid, which then dissolves the enamel on your teeth.

## **How can plaque cause decay?**

When you eat foods containing sugars and starches, the bacteria in plaque produce acids, which attack tooth enamel. The stickiness of the plaque keeps these acids in contact with teeth. After the teeth are attacked in this way many times, the tooth enamel breaks down forming a hole or cavity.

## **How can plaque cause gum disease?**

Plaque can harden into something called calculus (another name for it is 'tartar'). As calculus forms near the gumline, the plaque underneath releases poisons causing the gums to become irritated and inflamed. The gums begin to pull away from the teeth and the gaps become infected. If gum disease is not treated promptly, the bone supporting the teeth is destroyed and healthy teeth may be lost. Gum disease is the biggest cause of tooth loss in adults and can lead to dentures, bridges or implants.

## **Which type of toothbrush should I use?**

Your dentist or dental hygienist will be able to recommend a toothbrush to you. However, adults should choose a small to medium size brush with soft to medium multi-tufted, round-ended nylon bristles or 'filaments'. The head should be small enough to get into all parts of the mouth: especially the back of the mouth where cleaning can be difficult. Children need to use smaller brushes but with the same type of filaments.

You can now get more specialised toothbrushes. For instance, people with sensitive teeth can now use softer bristled brushes. There are also smaller headed toothbrushes for those people with crooked or irregular teeth.

Some people find it difficult to hold a toothbrush, for example because they have Parkinson's disease or a physical disability. There are now toothbrushes, which have large handles and angled heads to make them easier to use.

### **How should I brush?**

Here is one method of removing plaque:

1. Place the head of your toothbrush against your teeth, then tilt the bristle tips to a 45 degree angle against the gumline. Move the brush in small circular movements, several times, on all the surfaces of every tooth.
2. Brush the outer surfaces of each tooth, upper and lower, keeping the bristles angled against the gumline.
3. Use the same method on the inside surfaces of all your teeth.
4. Brush the chewing surfaces of the teeth.
5. To clean the inside surfaces of the front teeth, tilt the brush vertically and make several small circular strokes with the toe (the front part) of the brush.
6. Brushing your tongue will help freshen your breath and will clean your mouth by removing bacteria.

### **How often should I brush my teeth?**

Be sure to brush thoroughly with a fluoride toothpaste at least twice a day, more often if your dentist recommends it. If you keep getting discomfort or bleeding after brushing go to see your dentist about it.

### **How often should I change my toothbrush?**

Worn-out toothbrushes cannot clean your teeth properly and may damage your gums. It is important to change your toothbrush every two to three months, or sooner if the filaments become worn. When bristles become splayed, they do not clean properly.

### **Do electric toothbrushes clean better?**

Tests have proved that certain electric toothbrushes are better at removing plaque. They are particularly useful for people with limited movement, such as disabled or elderly people, who often find that using a normal toothbrush does not allow them to clean thoroughly. Electric toothbrushes can also be better for children as they may be more inclined to brush regularly because of the novelty of using an electric toothbrush. Discuss the idea with your dentist or hygienist to find out if you would benefit from using an electric toothbrush.

### **What should I do regularly to care for my teeth?**

Good dental health begins with you. By following this simple routine, you can keep your mouth clean and healthy:

- Brush your teeth twice a day using fluoride toothpaste.
- Have sugary drinks and snacks less often.
- Use a small to medium size toothbrush.
- Use a toothbrush with soft to medium multi-tufted, round-ended nylon bristles.
- Use a pea-sized amount of toothpaste.
- Use small circular movements to clean your teeth.
- Change your toothbrush regularly.
- Clean between your teeth using dental floss or wood sticks.
- Visit your dentist at least once a year.
- Look out for products with the 'British Dental Health Foundation Approved' symbol.

**Courtesy of the British Dental Health Foundation – [www.dentalhealth.org](http://www.dentalhealth.org)**