

Home Care Recommendations

by Dr. Warren C. Edwards.

Everyone's mouth contains bacteria. These bacteria are continually multiplying and forming a film in our mouths called *plaque*. If left undisturbed, this plaque leads to dental caries (cavities) and gum disease. Gum disease has been linked to a multitude of health problems. Plaque left undisturbed for 24 hours hardens into tartar or calculus, which contributes to gum disease, and can only be removed by a professional cleaning.

So the goal of home care is to disrupt this continuous cycle by mechanically removing the plaque from every tooth surface, including under the gums. To do this effectively, every tooth should be brushed at least twice daily, and flossed at least once a day to remove plaque from under the gums and between the teeth, where the brush cannot reach.

Although most people believe they do a good job of brushing; actually, most people don't. They don't do it well enough, or long enough. If your hygienist has mentioned deep pockets, or your gums bleed easily, your technique needs improvement. Use a disclosing liquid or tablet to dye the plaque, showing where you are leaving it undisturbed. Then use the methods described below to remove the plaque.

Start with a soft-bristled brush in good condition. Replace the brush every three or when the bristles start to splay. Hard bristles were once recommended, but are now thought to be too abrasive to the teeth and gums. You can adequately remove plaque with a manual brush, but studies comparing electric brushes with manual brushes have shown that electric brushes can reduce inflammation. Sonicare Elite and Braun 3D EXCEL are two of the top-rated brushes. The greater effectiveness of electric brushes may be due to the built-in two minute timer most contain. With a manual brush, people tend to brush a shorter time.

To effectively brush your teeth, put a small amount of fluoride toothpaste on your toothbrush and place the head of the brush beside your teeth, with the bristles at a 45 degree angle against the gum line (where the teeth and gums meet). Think of the brush as both a toothbrush and a gum brush. With the bristles contacting both tooth and gum, move the brush in circular motions across each tooth. Use a gentle vibrating motion, as if the goal were to massage the gum. Don't try to force the bristles under the gum; that will happen naturally with a soft brush. Begin with the outer surfaces of the upper and lower teeth. Then using the same circular motion, clean the inside surfaces; studies show inside surfaces are often neglected. For the front teeth, turn the brush vertically and make gentle up-and-down strokes over the teeth and gums. Lightly brush the chewing surfaces and for fresher breath finish by brushing your tongue.

There are many types of dental floss – thin, thick, flat, round, waxed, unwaxed, and flavored. For effective flossing, take about 18 inches of floss and wrap it lightly around your middle fingers. Firmly grasp it between each index finger and thumb. Carefully slide the floss up and down against each tooth and slightly under the gums. Remember the purpose is to scrape plaque off of the tooth surface. There are flossing aids such as floss threaders and floss holders, which your dental health professional will be happy to demonstrate.

Along with brushing and flossing, you can use mouthwash, which reduces bacteria and plaque in the mouth. There are many varieties of mouthwash on the market, as well as some herbal products that contain no alcohol. The most effective is chlorhexidine (Peridex), which is only available by prescription and is most commonly used after surgery; it is not for everyday use as it has an unpleasant aftertaste and stains the teeth..

Oral hygiene aids including rubber tip stimulators, interproximal brushes, tongue scrapers, and toothpicks may also improve plaque removal. A dental professional will be happy to demonstrate their proper use.

A healthy mouth does not happen by accident. It takes eating a healthy diet, daily brushing and flossing, and regular professional dental visits to keep your teeth and gums their healthiest.

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