

Brushing

Keeping your teeth clean and healthy

If you're like most people, you probably don't give too much thought to how you brush your teeth, beyond squirting on some toothpaste, and scrubbing back and forth. But as your dentist will tell you, how you brush your teeth matters a great deal.

That's because brushing plays a critical role in removing the plaque that can cause tooth decay and gum disease. You've probably heard that message a thousand times but there's a good chance you're not brushing correctly or as frequently as you should.

How often you brush, how long you brush for, the kind of technique and toothbrush you use all have a major impact on the effectiveness of your brushing. For instance, did you know that you should be brushing for a minimum of two minutes, twice a day? Most people don't come close to brushing for that long and often brush their teeth quickly and distractedly, in the middle of many other pressing tasks.

How long you brush for is just one thing you need to keep in mind to make sure that your teeth are as clean and healthy as possible.

Tools of the trade

It's always best to use a soft-bristled toothbrush with a small head and a flexible neck because this will most effectively remove plaque and debris from your teeth, without damaging your teeth and gums.

If you have limited hand mobility, you may find a powered toothbrush to be a better option since all you need to do is switch it on, lean the brush gently against your teeth and gums and let it do all the work.

Kids enjoy the fun of powered toothbrushes, especially when they're decorated with their favourite characters. An added advantage of these toothbrushes is that they can be programmed to run for two minutes, taking out the guesswork for kids and adults alike over brushing time.

If you're not sure which type of brush will work for you or your family, check with your dentist.

Replacing your brush, whether manual or powered, should take place when the bristles start to spread apart, or every three months, whichever comes first.

Timing it perfectly

To gain the maximum benefit from brushing your teeth, you should be brushing for at least two minutes morning and night, spending roughly 30 seconds on each quadrant of your mouth.

One fun way to make sure you spend sufficient time brushing your teeth is to fire up your streaming service, and play your favourite song. Brushing until the end of the song means you have done a thorough job of cleaning your teeth. Kids especially can benefit from this method; brushing together as a family with music ensures that everyone is brushing for long enough.

Brushing with a manual toothbrush

Starting at the back of your mouth with the toothbrush bristle at the gumline on a 45° angle, you should systematically clean your teeth, brushing gently in a circular motion. Scrubbing too hard from side to side runs the risk of causing your gums to recede, as well as damaging the enamel on the surface of your teeth.

Always take care to brush every part of your teeth; that means going carefully along the inner, outer and chewing surfaces, making sure you tip the toothbrush so you can reach the inner front areas of teeth, which is often missed.

And yes, you do need to brush your tongue. It may seem strange at first but it reduces the bacteria in your mouth and helps your breath to stay fresh. To brush it, all you need to do is push the bristles on the tongue and scrape gently forward.

When you have finished brushing, try to spit out the toothpaste but don't rinse with water, since leaving some toothpaste on your teeth acts like a mini-fluoride treatment and gives your teeth ongoing protection.



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Brushing with a powered toothbrush

The position of the powered toothbrush should be the same as with a manual toothbrush, at 45° at the gumline. The big advantage of powered toothbrushes is that their oscillating-rotating heads supply all the movement. All you need to do is guide the brush slowly from tooth to tooth, stopping for a few seconds on each one, systematically following the contours of your teeth and the curve of your gums.

Tempting as it is to think that pressing harder on your teeth equals a better clean, the fact is that too much pressure can damage your gums and the enamel. If the bristles are wearing out on your toothbrushes well before the three month mark, you're pressing too hard and you should ask your dentist to show you a less damaging technique.

The importance of the right toothpaste

While there are a lot of toothpastes on the market, you should choose one that contains fluoride. When added to toothpaste, fluoride strengthens teeth, making them more resistant to attacks from sugar and acid, thereby preventing decay. Fluoride can also help re-mineralise (heal or reverse) early decay. Depending on your risk of dental decay your dentist will recommend a type of toothpaste best suited to you.

Fluoride toothpaste for children

Unless it's recommended by your dentist, the general consensus is that you shouldn't use toothpaste when cleaning the teeth of children under 18 months of age. Instead, use a small soft toothbrush and simply use tap water to wet the brush. For children between 18 months and six years old, use a pea sized amount of low fluoride toothpaste (sometimes labelled junior or children's). Adults should always supervise children brushing their teeth until the age of eight to ensure they don't swallow the toothpaste.



Fluoride toothpaste and risk of tooth decay

If you're a patient at high risk of developing tooth decay, your dentist may recommend you use a higher strength fluoride toothpaste. You may be deemed a person of "high decay risk" if:

- you're undergoing orthodontic treatment (braces)
- your diet is high in sugar or acid
- you have difficulty brushing your teeth due to arthritis or a disability
- you have "dry mouth", or low amounts of saliva
- you're living in an area without fluoridated water.



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