

Basic Oral Hygiene

By Dr. Jack Horbal

Why do it?

Our mouths are full of bacteria. The bacteria colonize our mouths at the moment of birth and are hitchhikers for the rest of our lives. The bugs live on the inside of our cheeks, gums, tongues, and on our teeth. The ones on our teeth are called *plaque*. Plaque is nothing more than a constantly-forming, invisible film of bacteria and its byproducts on our teeth.

The bugs are just like you and I: they need to eat. They eat anything edible that we put in our mouths; they like sweets the best, but they'll eat anything they can get. Just like you and I, they make waste products. One of their waste products is *acid*; it is the acid that eats into the tooth enamel (a process called demineralization), and makes a hole. This is a *cavity*; it is not caused by the bugs eating the tooth, nor the sugar harming the tooth, but by bugs eating the sugar and converting it into acid.

The basic goal of oral hygiene is to **remove plaque** from our teeth. In other words, the goal is to clean off the bugs so that they don't sit around and make acid.

Tooth Brushing

This is the basic way of removing plaque from our teeth. Brushing should be done at least twice a day. The night-time (before bed) brushing is the most important. Do not skip this one. Don't go to bed with bugs on your teeth; they'll be undisturbed for the next 6-7 hours and most of the damage occurs then.

Time yourself. Ideally you should be spending at least one whole minute on the uppers and one whole minute on the lowers. Position the bristles at a 45 degree angle to the gumline and brush back and forth (unless I've instructed you otherwise). Ask me, and I'll be happy to demonstrate. Do brush the gums when you brush the teeth, and don't forget the tongue, give it several swipes with your toothbrush. There are tongue scrapers available and seem to be a good idea.

Toothbrushes

The most important part of the toothbrush is the bristles; all the rest is fluff. There are so many choices that it's mind boggling. It's not important who makes it, how many curves in the handle, etc. It *is* important that you use only **soft bristles**. Over the years, hard bristles will actually wear your teeth and gums unnecessarily. Keep in mind that it's the tips of the bristles that do the work; so if your toothbrush is beginning to look like a fountain, get a new one. Typically a toothbrush lasts about 3 months.

Toothpastes

Essentially all toothpastes are the same, and which toothpaste one uses is not as important as most of us believe. Find something you like and use it.

Flossing

Brushing is great, but a toothbrush cannot get in between the adjacent teeth; this is where flossing comes in. The rationale for flossing is not really to get stuck pieces of food out, although it is great for that (we all reach for the floss after eating corn on the cob); the real reason for flossing is to mechanically scrape off the plaque from the tooth surfaces unreachable by the brush.

There are many techniques for flossing, but basically, start with a generous length of floss (18-24 inches works great for me), and wrap it around your middle fingers. While keeping the tension use your thumbs and index fingers to maneuver the floss. If you have any difficulty ask me, I'll be happy to show you how to do this. Go in between two teeth and scrape **up and down** first on one tooth and then on the other. Do go into the gum a little. If you are just snapping the floss in and out, you've only cleaned the contact points and not past them, where most of plaque collects. Do not use the floss back and forth like a saw; you may cut your gum. You can "saw" through a tight contact point, but once you're past it, only go up and down.

When you dirty a segment, advance to the next section. Go in between **all** teeth. You may see some bleeding initially; it will decrease with regular flossing. Ideally you should floss daily. As with brushing, the best time to floss is before bed. However, if you are really good with your flossing, I'll still be happy if you do it every other day. If the floss catches or is hard to remove when you are taking it out, pull it out the side – especially if you have a lot of crowns or inlays. Floss comes waxed, unwaxed, flavored, and in various sizes and colors. It's not important what kind you use, as long as you floss with it. Find something you like and use it.

Mouthwashes

Generally speaking, for most individuals mouthwashes are completely unnecessary. A lot of them contain alcohol (in surprisingly high amounts) and, while it is true that alcohol kills bacteria (i.e. plaque), the effect is transient and not all that significant. If you enjoy the temporary feeling of freshness, that's up to you.