Electric vs. manual toothbrushes [1]

Dear Alice,

My parents recently gave me an electric toothbrush as a gift ? one of those ones that supposedly vibrates at 30,000 cycles per second, thereby cleaning the teeth like no manual toothbrush can. Could you tell me whether these brushes really work better than conventional toothbrushes?

Thanks,

Befuddled Brusher

Answer

Dear Befuddled Brusher,

It looks like your parents have been brushing up on their dental hygiene knowledge. Studies published in both the American Journal of Dentistry and the British Dental Journal agree that electric or powered toothbrushes are more effective at removing plaque and reducing gingivitis than manual ones. Other studies have concluded that this is true, both in the short and long term. This is because powered toothbrushes not only move bristles at a much faster speed than you could achieve manually (humans usually do about 300 strokes per minute), they also remove plaque more evenly in hard-to-reach places, such as between teeth and on back molars. Currently, the American Dental Association (ADA) recommends powered toothbrushes, particularly for people with manual dexterity problems or other physical limitations (such as arthritis) that might make it difficult to use manual toothbrushes.

Powered toothbrushes generally fall into one of two categories: electric and sonic. It sounds like your parents got you a sonic toothbrush. Sonic toothbrushes produce about 30 to 40 thousand strokes per minute, while electric brushes make about 3,000 to 7,500 brushing motions per minute. None of this means, however, that the manual toothbrush is obsolete ? rather, it means that most people in studies do a better job of cleaning of their teeth with an electric toothbrush.

No matter which kind of toothbrush you use, it is recommended that you follow proper brushing technique. The ADA suggests that you:

- Use a fluoride toothpaste
- Brush at a 45-degree angle to the gums
- Use short, gentle back and forth strokes
• Brush all surfaces of each tooth (including the inside surfaces near the tongue)
• Brush your tongue [3]

As your parents now know, electric toothbrushes can be pricey, so you might want to check with your dentist first if you are thinking of buying one. If s/he thinks you’re doing a great job with the classic model, consider skipping the latest techno-brush (with built-in pressure sensor and timer), and investing some of the money you save on floss [4].

Alice!
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