Why do I have to brush my teeth?! [1]

Dear Alice,

My mom was a working single mother as a kid. I never learned a lot of basic hygiene skills because we didn't have a regular routine (I'm 19, but only learned how to shower correctly a few years ago and how to take care of my hair last year). I've been catching up on a lot of these habits, but there's one I just can't stick... tooth-brushing. I'm extremely lucky? I have straight, even teeth (though I never had braces), no visible discoloration (even though I drink coffee and tea regularly), and for some reason my breath rarely smells bad (unless I eat something pungent). I get compliments on my smile all the time! But because I'm so lucky, I find it really hard to motivate myself to brush and floss every night/ morning. After all, if my teeth look and smell fine, why bother? I'm pretty sure that this can't be good for me, even if my teeth seem healthy. Can you give me some solid facts on why tooth-brushing is important so I can remind myself why I need to do it?

Thanks!

Jaws

Answer

Dear Jaws,

Brusha, brusha, brusha! Preventive routines may sometimes be hard to stick to, but you're never too old to learn new habits. While your mouth may currently be aesthetically pleasing and odor-free, proper oral hygiene can help keep it that way? having a nice smile is not always the same as having a healthy, cavity-free, smile. Read on for some information that may help you maintain an oral health routine for more reasons than just keeping your teeth clean and breath fresh?

Two of the major reasons to brush and floss regularly are to prevent cavities and gum disease. Cavities, caused by plaque [2] (a thin layer of bacteria that forms on the tooth's surface), result in holes in the tooth's hard protective outside shell (a.k.a. enamel). Once a hole forms, it leaves the softer, more vulnerable tissue underneath susceptible to damage and infection. The other big reason to prioritize the care of your pearly whites: gum disease [3]. The early stage of gum disease, called gingivitis, is common, but also treatable and reversible. However, when gingivitis progresses into periodontitis, it can have long-lasting and serious negative health effects on both oral hygiene and overall well-being. Periodontitis begins with gums separating from the teeth, forming pockets that become infected and eventually lead to
the destruction of gum and bone tissue. Over time, teeth can loosen and fall out, or require removal. Furthermore, periodontitis has been linked to other serious health problems, including rheumatoid arthritis, premature or low-birth weight babies, asthma, complications for diabetics, increased risk of stroke, and respiratory issues.

The good news: proper brushing and flossing habits can help prevent this type of damage from happening. What does it mean to take care of your choppers properly? The American Dental Association (ADA) [4] recommends the following:

- **Have your tools at the ready.** Use a soft-bristled brush that is a good size and shape for your mouth. If the bristles are broken or bent, you might be ready for a replacement brush (plan for a new one every three to four months). While you’re at it, grab some fluoride toothpaste and some floss, too.
- **Get an angle on your brushstrokes.** Try to gently brush all the way from the intersection of the tooth and gum to the chewing surfaces of the tooth, holding the toothbrush at a forty-five degree angle to the surface. For chewing surfaces, short brushstrokes with the brush bristles pushing into the tooth’s crevices are recommended.
- **Take note of your tongue.** Brushing your tongue [5] is also a good idea; bacteria can build up there as well.
- **Don’t be in a rush to brush.** Dentists recommend that you brush for a minimum of two minutes twice a day and that you floss [6] once a day.

To make your oral hygiene routine more fun and motivate you to make the commitment twice a day, make sure you regularly replace your toothbrush and pick toothpaste and floss flavors that you like. To get to two minutes, try listening to a favorite song while you brush, switching the section of teeth you brush every 30 seconds. Electric toothbrushes [7] can be pricey, but may be easier (and more effective) for some who find it difficult to use a manual brush. Lastly, see your dental health care provider for more on how to keep your teeth healthy and for recommended routine care beyond daily maintenance.

Happy brushing!

Alice!

Category:
General Health [8]
Body Maintenance [9]
Habits [10]

Related questions

Receding gums [12]
What should I look for in mouthwash? [13]
More on bad breath (halitosis) [14]

Published date:
Apr 26, 2013
Last reviewed on:
May 20, 2016