Dear Alice,

Here's a question I have been debating with a friend for a while, and seeing as how I'm not scheduled to go to the dentist again for a while, I thought you could shed some light on the issue: when brushing one's teeth, should one also brush one's tongue? I would think yes, because what's the point of brushing germs off teeth if the tongue still has them there, and will transfer them to the teeth as soon as you're done brushing. My friend thinks it makes absolutely no difference. So does it matter? We have an ice cream wagered on this one! I hope I'm right!

Answer

Dear Reader,

Kudos to you and your friend for discussing dental hygiene! Tongue brushing, in contrast to tooth brushing, is really more of an option than a necessity. Brushing our teeth actually breaks up the plaque that forms in everyone's mouth, rather than removing germs. During the day, bacteria, which are always present, colonize the food particles that remain in your mouth after eating. The accumulation of food and bacteria produces plaque, which takes approximately twenty-four hours to form. Thorough brushing at least once a day keeps the bacteria from sticking?that's the key to healthy teeth.

The main purpose for tongue brushing is to remove these same stuck food particles before they cause odor. Some people need to do this often, and others, not at all. Generally, the tongue tends to be self-cleaning; it has a movable surface and is constantly bathed in saliva, so remnants of meals don't hang around for too long. Your teeth are also covered in saliva, but since they're hard and immovable, the food has a chance to latch on and stay put.

For people who feel they have a problem with bad breath, tongue brushing may help. Special tongue scrapers are available at many grocery or health and beauty aide stores; they are usually handled, tear-drop shaped devices with ridges. The only benefit to these tongue scrapers is that they are less likely to hit the back of one's throat and cause the gag reflex. They are by no means necessary, though, since the same results can be accomplished with a popsicle stick or regular old toothbrush (For more information, read More on bad breath (halitosis) [2] in the Go Ask Alice! archives).
So, since there's truth in what both you and your friend thought, why not buy each other some ice cream? Enjoy!

Alice!
Category:
General Health [3]
Oral Health [4]

Related questions
Dental x-ray dangers? [5]
Alcohol in mouthwash? Does it cause cancer? [6]
Antiseptic vs. antibacterial mouthwashes [7]
What should I look for in mouthwash? [8]
Wisdom teeth removed: What do I do now? [9]

Published date:
May 21, 1999
Last reviewed on:
May 22, 2014