

Oral Health

Teeth and gum care

Plaque is the most common cause of tooth decay and gum disease. Regular, correct brushing and flossing can remove plaque and help keep teeth and gums healthy. Regular dental checks are also important. Dentists and other oral health professionals can advise on tooth and gum care, and detect and treat tooth decay.

Plaque is a thin sticky film, containing bacteria, that continually builds up on teeth. It has a rough, furry feel. The bacteria in plaque ferment sugars in food, producing acids that can dissolve tooth enamel. Plaque bacteria can also damage gums.

Plaque is soft and can be removed by brushing and flossing, but it quickly reforms. Plaque that stays on teeth longer than a few days can harden into calculus (tartar) and act as a reservoir for bacteria. Calculus needs to be removed by a dentist or other oral health professional.

Tooth decay (dental caries)

Tooth decay is caused by acids produced by plaque bacteria, and may lead to a cavity (hole) in the tooth.

Symptoms include:

When decay starts there may be no symptoms, but as it worsens symptoms can include:

- White spot or patch on the tooth
- Pain when eating or drinking something sweet, hot or cold
- Pain when biting down
- Toothache
- Visible hole or pit in tooth.

Treatment may include:

- A filling – fills the cavity
- A crown – covers and protects the whole tooth
- Root canal therapy – removes the tooth's inner pulp and replaces it with a filling
- Tooth extraction.

Gum disease (periodontal disease)

Periodontal disease affects the gums and other tissues that hold and support teeth. The most common cause is bacteria in plaque and calculus.

Mild gum disease is called gingivitis and severe disease is called periodontitis.

Symptoms include:

- Red, swollen and bleeding gums
- Bad breath or a bad taste in the mouth
- Receding gums
- Sensitive teeth or gums
- Loose teeth.

Treatment includes:

- Plaque and calculus removal by a dentist or other oral health professional
- Regular and thorough tooth brushing and cleaning between teeth.

Factors affecting tooth and gum health include:

- Tooth and gum cleaning habits
- Eating and drinking – Frequently eating and drinking foods that contain sugars or acids increases the risk of tooth decay.
- Fluoride – Fluoride is a mineral that strengthens tooth enamel. In Australia, fluoride is added to the mains water supply to help prevent tooth decay. Bottled and filtered water may not contain this extra fluoride

- Dry mouth – Saliva helps protect teeth from decay. Reduced saliva flow can increase the risk of decay.
- Smoking – increases the risks of gum disease and oral cancer, and stains teeth.
- Some medicines and illegal drugs (e.g. dry mouth is a side effect of some medicines and drugs). Ask a pharmacist for advice.
- Some medical conditions (e.g. diabetes, eating disorders)
- Some medical treatments (e.g. radiotherapy can cause dry mouth)

Self care

Ways to prevent tooth decay and gum disease include:

- Brush your teeth for two minutes at least twice every day, in the morning and at bedtime. If you can't brush after eating, rinse your mouth with water and/or chew sugar-free gum.
- Floss or clean between teeth at least once every day
- Use a fluoride toothpaste. Spit out toothpaste after brushing, but don't rinse mouth. Low fluoride children's toothpaste is recommended for children aged 18 months to 6 years. Children under 18 months should not use toothpaste
- Drink plenty of tap water for its fluoride content
- Limit how often you (and your children) have foods and drinks containing sugars and acids (e.g. soft drinks). Try to limit these foods to meal times

- Limit alcohol intake
- Limit caffeine intake (tea, coffee, cola, energy drinks)
- Don't smoke
- Have your teeth checked regularly.

Important

Have your teeth checked by a dentist or other oral health professional at least once (preferably twice) every year.

Consult a dentist promptly if you have:

- Tooth, gum or jaw pain

- Red, swollen or bleeding gums
- Sensitivity to sweet, hot or cold foods or drinks
- Gums that are receding from your teeth
- Pus around your teeth and gums
- A bad taste in your mouth
- Unexplained bad breath
- Changes in the feel of your teeth or dentures.

A brushing technique recommended by dentists

Some powered toothbrushes may remove plaque better than manual toothbrushes. Ask an oral health professional for advice about toothbrushes.

Manual toothbrush:

- Use a brush with a small head and soft bristles
- Place your toothbrush at a 45-degree angle to your teeth, aiming the bristles toward the gum line
- Move the brush gently back and forward, using very small movements, brushing one or two teeth at a time
- Clean the front, back and chewing surfaces of each tooth
- Brush your tongue.

Power toothbrush:

- Use a brush with a small round head with soft bristles
- Gently guide the brush from tooth to tooth at the gumline on the inside and outside surfaces. Also clean the chewing surfaces
- Brush your tongue.

Replace your brush or brush head when it becomes frayed or shaggy.

A flossing technique recommended by dentists

Flossing cleans between teeth. It is best to floss just before brushing.

- Gently ease the dental floss or tape between your teeth.
- Pull the ends of the floss or tape against the front and back surface of a tooth so that it forms a "C" as it wraps around the tooth.
- Gently pull the floss or tape from the gumline to the top of the tooth, using a gentle sawing motion against the side of the tooth.
- Use fresh floss or tape as you progress through your teeth.

If you have trouble getting floss between your teeth, try waxed floss. If it's hard to manipulate the floss, try a floss holder. If you have larger spaces between your teeth, try an interdental brush.

Dental emergencies

Toothache

- Place a cold compress onto cheek to reduce swelling.
- Take a pain relieving medicine if needed. Swallow the medicine, do not place on the tooth.
- Consult a dentist immediately.

Knocked out tooth

- Hold tooth by the crown (not root). If dirty, rinse tooth in milk (preferably) or water or have patient suck it clean. Do not scrub root surface.
- Fit tooth back into its socket. If not possible, wrap in plastic cling wrap or place in milk or inside patient's cheek.
- Consult a dentist immediately.

For more information

A dentist

Listed under 'D' in the yellow pages of the phone book.

Australian Dental Association

Website www.ada.org.au

Healthdirect Australia

Phone: 1800 022 222

Website: www.healthinsite.gov.au

Consumer Medicine Information (CMI)

Your pharmacist can advise on CMI leaflets.

National Prescribing Service (NPS) Medicines Information

Phone: 1300 MEDICINE (1300 633 424)

Website: www.nps.org.au

The Poisons Information Centre

In case of poisoning phone 13 11 26 from anywhere in Australia.

Pharmacists are medicines experts.

Ask a pharmacist for advice when choosing a medicine.

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