

How To Prevent Tooth Loss

Dental decay at any age is caused by "bad" bacteria in the mouth that cling to the enamel of the teeth. When these bug make contact with the sugar in our food, they form an acid that penetrates the enamel and makes it porous. Although dental decay in childhood is not as common as it used to be, tartar and plaque still are. Here's how to keep the tartar and plaque under control:

Brush your teeth with a soft- or medium-bristle brush at least twice a day and preferably after every meal. A soft brush is more effective than a hard one because it massages the gums as you brush, and it also gets into the crevices more effectively. Use toothpaste that contains fluoride. Brush vertically in short strokes, four or five times, holding the toothbrush at a forty-five-degree angle against your gums. Brush all parts of your teeth – outer, inner, and chewing surfaces. The point of brushing is to clean your teeth, not to wipe them, so brush for at least three full minutes.

Brushing the teeth at bedtime is an American ritual. While that is better than not brushing at all, it is not effective as doing so right after you eat. The point of brushing is to get rid of the sugar that leads to plaque and tartar formation. If you eat dinner then wait for several hours before cleaning your teeth, sugar remains in contact with your teeth all that time. I'm not suggesting that you should excuse yourself when eating out in order to hunt for a washroom where you can brush your teeth. But when you are dining at home, brush right after dessert.

Flossing. Even if you brush meticulously for a full three minutes, you'll still remove only 80 percent of the fresh plaque off your teeth. That's why flossing is so necessary. The right way to floss is to use about eighteen inches of floss, either waxed or unwaxed. Wind most of it around the middle finger of one hand and the rest around the same finger of the other hand. Holding the floss tight between your thumb and forefinger, move it between your teeth, up around the gum, then down along the tooth. From time to time, unwind some clean floss off one finger and take up the used floss with the other.

Your dentist or periodontist should clean your teeth, deep-scale the plaques and tartar, and plane the root surfaces of the teeth below the gum line at least twice a year. If you are a plaque maker, however, you may need it done more often than that.

Ask your dentist about mouth rinses that contain the antibacterial agent chlorhexidine. Chlorhexidine reduces plaque by 55 percent, but it discolors the teeth in some people, especially when they use a full-strength version that is not diluted. I prefer Listerine antiseptic, it is somewhat less effective – it cuts plaque by 28 percent – but it doesn't require a prescription and won't stain your teeth.

Look for a toothpaste like Total that, in addition to the usual chloride, contains triclosan. This is an antibacterial agent that adheres to the teeth after brushing, reduces the accumulation of tartar and plaque, and helps prevent infection of the gums.

Saliva rinses away food particles and neutralizes harmful acids. However, as we get older, our mouths are not as juicy, so that the gums become more vulnerable to infection. Whatever the cause, chewing gum (preferably the sugarless variety), although it may not be the most elegant thing to do, does increase the production of saliva. And here's a tip for dealing with dry mouth I'll bet you never heard of: Cheese, especially cheddar, neutralizes the acid produced by bacteria and increases the flow of saliva.

Tobacco doubles the risk of your becoming edentulous by hindering your immune response and by decreasing blood flow to the gums. If you smoke one pack a day, expect to lose two teeth every ten years.

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About the Author

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