



Dental Care for You and Your Family

Keeping your teeth and gums healthy is an important part of overall good health. It starts with brushing at least twice a day. It's also very important to use dental floss to remove plaque. Plaque is the soft, cream-colored deposit that builds up between the teeth. The goal is to get rid of it before it turns hard. Plaque invites bacteria to grow and attack the tooth, which can cause cavities or gum disease. It's also important to eat healthy foods. Try to stay away from cookies, cakes, and soda. Starchy and sugary foods and drinks cause tooth decay, as well as weight gain. Choose crunchy foods such as apples, carrots, and other raw vegetables that help clean the teeth naturally.

The following simple tips can help keep everyone's teeth and gums healthy. Start with caring for your infant's mouth and gums.

Teach kids to brush and floss their teeth

Caring for baby teeth is very important. They have to last up to 12 years. If your child has a tooth pulled, or many cavities, it can affect the permanent teeth that will come in later. Here's how you can ensure the health of these precious teeth:

- Do not put your baby to bed with a bottle.
- Wipe the baby's teeth and gums clean after every feeding with a soft, damp washcloth or a gauze pad.
- Brush your child's teeth with plain water as soon as they come in.

By age three, if you show them how, kids can brush their own teeth. Use a child-size toothbrush and a pea-sized amount of toothpaste. You can teach them to floss as soon as the teeth touch each other. At least once each day, check to be sure that younger children have gotten rid of all the plaque. Try to make brushing fun. Reward them for doing a good job, and let them see you brush your teeth, too.

A small amount of a substance called fluoride can help prevent tooth decay in children. Your child's physician or dentist may want to write a prescription for a fluoride supplement to help keep your child's teeth healthy. Many prescription vitamins for children and pregnant women also have fluoride in them. If the fluoride in your water supply is low, or your child only drinks bottled water, your dentist can make sure you get extra fluoride. Dentists also sometimes use a substance to seal the teeth to help prevent cavities. Talk to your pediatrician and your child's dentist before supplementing.

Get regular dental checkups

Schedule a visit to the dentist when your child is one year old.

Try to find a dentist who specializes in pediatric care, who is comfortable seeing a younger child. The dentist may not do much at these first visits, but starting early can identify problems early and gets your child used to going so he is not afraid when he has cleanings later on.

Both children and adults should get checkups and cleanings every six months. (You may want to get them more often if you have a lot of plaque.) If you or your kids play sports, it's a good idea to wear a mouth guard. This can greatly reduce the chance of injuries to the mouth and teeth.

Get to know about different kinds of dentists

There are many kinds of dentists that can help you care for your teeth. Although most dental problems are handled by a general dentist, he or she may call on various specialists.

Types of special dentists:

- *Pedodontist* is trained in children's dental health
- *Periodontist* treats gum or periodontal disease
- *Endodontist* performs root canal treatments and saves dead or abscessed teeth so they don't have to be pulled and replaced with false teeth
- *Orthodontist* uses braces to straighten crooked teeth
- *Oral surgeon* removes unhealthy teeth and does other surgical procedures on the mouth and jaw
- *Prosthodontist* makes dentures and bridgework for patients with particularly difficult problems

Protect your gums

A very common dental problem is periodontal disease—also known as plaque and gum disease. About 75 to 80 percent of Americans have some form of gum disease. If teeth are not properly cared for, the gums may get swollen and bleed easily. The first stage of gum disease is called *gingivitis*. It's important to take care of it right away. If you don't, the gum may separate from the teeth, creating pockets of infection. Pus may form around the edges of the gum, causing a bad taste and bad breath. This stage is called *pyorrhea*. Over time, the part of the jawbone that holds the teeth will be damaged, and healthy teeth can loosen and fall out. You can prevent these problems. If you follow the daily tips and techniques described here and get regular dental checkups, you can keep your own and your family's teeth and gums healthy.

Talk with your dentist about medications or health problems

Most dental work is very safe. If you are taking medications or have health problems, talk to your doctor or dentist before you have work done. If you are taking a blood thinning medication (such as Coumadin or Warfarin), you could have more bleeding. Be sure to talk with your dentist ahead of time so you can take steps to avoid this.

Call your dentist if ...

- Your gums bleed when you press them or often bleed when you brush your teeth
- Your gums are red or swollen
- You have a toothache
- Your teeth are loose or seem to be moving apart

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Other resources

- Connect to our Web site at **kp.org** to access health and drug encyclopedias, interactive programs, health classes, and much more.
- Check your *Kaiser Permanente Healthwise Handbook*.
- Contact your Kaiser Permanente Health Education Center or Department for health information, programs, and other resources.

This information is not intended to diagnose health problems or to take the place of medical advice or care you receive from your physician or other health care professional. If you have persistent health problems, or if you have additional questions, please consult with your doctor.