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 can be hard to stick to, but you're never too old to learn new habits. While your mouth might currently be aesthetically pleasing and odor-free, good oral hygiene will help keep it that way. Having a nice smile is not always the same as having a healthy smile. Here's some information to help you maintain a brushing and flossing routine twice a day for more reasons than keeping teeth clean and breathe fresh?
Two of the most important reasons to brush regularly are to fight cavities and gum disease. Cavities are holes in the enamel, or hard protective outside shell, of the tooth. Cavities are caused by plaque, a thin layer of bacteria that forms on the tooth’s surface. Once a hole forms, it leaves the softer, more vulnerable tissue underneath susceptible to damage and infection. Good brushing and flossing habits can help prevent this from happening. How should you brush? 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 best. Dentists recommend that you brush using this technique for a minimum of two minutes twice a day and that you floss once a day.

Gum disease can begin slowly, with a slight inflammation of the gums, including swelling, and maybe some mild discomfort and bad breath. This early stage of gum disease, called gingivitis, is treatable and reversible, as well as very common; approximately 60% of 15 year-olds have gingivitis. The larger risk, however, comes when gingivitis progresses into periodontitis. This much more severe stage of gum disease can have long-lasting and severe 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 heart disease, complications in diabetics, increased risk of stroke, respiratory diseases (pneumonia in particular) and certain cancers (kidney, pancreatic, blood). Are you convinced yet?

To make your oral hygiene routine more fun and motivate you 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 thirty seconds. Electric toothbrushes can be pricey, but some people think they’re worth the investment. Speak with your dental health care provider for more facts and tips if you still need convincing, otherwise, happy brushing!

Alice!

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