Dear Alice,

I'm not exactly sure how to floss properly. I don't really know how to get between every single tooth in my mouth.

Answer

Dear Reader,

Kudos to you on asking about the ins and outs of flossing! Daily brushing does a lot of the work removing plaque and harmful bacteria from your teeth, but it can't do it all. Flossing, as a part of a regular oral care routine, may help remove particles from the nooks and crannies of your pearly whites. While string floss is often the variety that is discussed when describing this hygienic activity, there are some additional options for getting to (and between) the harder-to-reach areas in your mouth.

First, a primer on flossing practice is in order. If you have any questions, your dentist or other oral health care provider may be able to provide a demonstration. Here's the basic lowdown on the method recommended by the American Dental Association:

1. Cut off a piece of floss that is approximately 18 inches in length.
2. Lightly wrap each side of the piece of floss several times around the middle finger of each hand.
3. Carefully maneuver the floss in between the teeth with your index fingers and thumbs. Use an up and down, not side-to-side motion.
4. Bring the floss up and down, making sure to go below the gum line, forming a "C" on the side of each tooth (even the back molars — they need a good flossing, too!).
5. Make sure to use clean sections of the floss with each tooth.

So, now that you've got the practice down, you'll need the proper tools! As you stroll along the oral health aisle at your local pharmacy or market, do you “wax on” or “wax off”? Both waxed and unwaxed floss are equally effective at cleaning the gunk from between your choppers, but some folks have reported sensitivity to the waxed or coated varieties in rare cases. What about other options? Today's floss choices go beyond waxed or unwaxed; there are many options available.
on the market. These include flavored flosses in spearmint, cinnamon, and peppermint; anti-
plaque, antibacterial, and fluoride-coated flosses; threader floss to get under braces and bridges;
floss pics (wooden or plastic pics that are also called interdental cleaners); the list keeps going. Whichever variety you choose, effectiveness seems to be less dependent on the type and more on how you use it.

To speak to your challenge with getting in between all of your teeth, you may be heartened to know that there are a number of products available for people with different flossing needs. Flossing tools, such as a prethreaded flosser or floss holder may be helpful for people who are just learning how to floss, individuals with limited dexterity in their arms or hands, or persons who are flossing the teeth of someone else. Water flossers, which are handheld devices that spray water to wash away bits of food from between the teeth, may be the ticket to cleaner teeth and gums for those with braces or other dental work that present challenges to flossing. With many options to try, considering what your particular needs are may help to inform which tool may work best for you.

Lastly, it's worth noting that the necessity or effectiveness of flossing has been more recently called into question. A number of systematic reviews criticized studies on flossing for their small participant sizes, lack of randomization, and the interpretation of results. However, given that displacing plaque is seen to be in support of oral health and the lack of harms associated with the practice, the general recommendation to floss at least once a day, in addition to brushing and regular check-ups, remains.

Hope you find flossing to be fantastic!

Alice!

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