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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! ^[2] Preventive routines may sometimes be hard to stick to, but you're never too old to learn new habits. While your mouth may currently be aesthetically pleasing and odor-free, proper oral hygiene can help keep it that way — having a nice smile isn't always the same as having a healthy, cavity-free, smile. Read on for some information that may help you maintain an oral health routine for more reasons than just keeping your teeth clean and breath fresh.

Two of the major reasons to brush and floss regularly are to prevent cavities and gum disease. Cavities, caused by plaque (a thin layer of bacteria that forms on the tooth's surface), result in holes in the tooth's hard protective outside shell (also known as enamel). Once a hole forms, it leaves the softer, more vulnerable tissue underneath susceptible to damage and infection. The other big reason to prioritize the care of your pearly whites: gum disease. The early stage of gum

disease, called gingivitis, is common, but also treatable and reversible. However, when gingivitis progresses into periodontitis, it can have long-lasting and serious 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, there is a possibility that periodontitis could be linked to other serious health issues, including rheumatoid arthritis, asthma, increased risk of stroke, and respiratory issues (though more research is needed to confirm these links).

The good news: proper brushing and flossing habits can help prevent this type of damage from happening. What does it mean to take care of your choppers properly? The [American Dental Association \(ADA\)](#) ^[3] recommends the following:

- **Have your tools at the ready.** Using a soft-bristled brush that is a good size and shape for your mouth is recommended. If the bristles are broken or bent, you might be ready for a replacement brush (ideally planning for a new one every three to four months). While you're at it, you can grab some fluoride toothpaste and some floss, too.
- **Get an angle on your brushstrokes.** Gently brushing all the way from the intersection of the tooth and gum to the chewing surfaces of the tooth, holding the toothbrush at a 45 degree angle to the surface is advised. For chewing surfaces, short brushstrokes with the brush bristles pushing into the tooth's crevices are recommended.
- **Take time for your teeth.** Dentists recommend brushing for a minimum of two minutes twice a day and [flossing](#) ^[4] once a day.

To make your oral hygiene routine more fun and motivate you to make the commitment twice a day, regularly replacing your toothbrush (think new colors and styles!) and picking toothpaste and floss flavors that you like may keep the habit fresh. To get to two minutes, you might try listening to a favorite song while you brush, switching the section of teeth you brush every 30 seconds. Electric toothbrushes can be pricey, but may be easier (and more effective) for some who find it difficult to use a manual brush. Lastly, it's key to see your dental health care provider for more on how to keep your teeth healthy and for recommended routine care beyond daily maintenance.

Three cheers for brushing up on everyday oral hygiene!

Alice!

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