

## Is tongue brushing necessary? <sup>[1]</sup>

Dear Alice,

Here's a question I have been debating with a friend for a while, and seeing as how I'm not scheduled to go to the dentist again for a while, I thought you could shed some light on the issue: when brushing one's teeth, should one also brush one's tongue? I would think yes, because what's the point of brushing germs off teeth if the tongue still has them there, and will transfer them to the teeth as soon as you're done brushing. My friend thinks it makes absolutely no difference. So does it matter? We have an ice cream wagered on this one! I hope I'm right!

### **Answer**

Dear Reader,

Kudos to you and your friend for discussing dental hygiene! Tongue brushing, in contrast to tooth brushing, is really more of an option than a necessity. Brushing your teeth actually breaks up the plaque that forms in everyone's mouth, rather than removing germs. During the day, bacteria (which are always present) colonize the food particles that remain in your mouth after eating. The accumulation of food and bacteria produces plaque, which takes approximately 24 hours to form. Thorough brushing every day keeps the bacteria from sticking — that's the key to healthy teeth.

The main purpose for tongue brushing is to remove stuck food particles before they cause odor. Some people need to do this often, and others, not at all. Generally, the tongue tends to be self-cleaning: it has a movable surface and is constantly bathed in saliva, so remnants of meals don't hang around for too long. Your teeth are also covered in saliva, but since they're hard and immovable, the food has a chance to latch on and stay put. That said, when it comes to fighting against less than fresh mouth odor in the short-term (a few hours), some research has suggested that tongue brushing or scraping may be more effective when it comes to battling malodorous breath than just brushing teeth alone.

For those interested in another tool to fight bad breath, taking time to attend to the tongue may help. Special tongue scrapers are available at many grocery stores or pharmacies; they are usually handled, teardrop-shaped devices with ridges. The only benefit to these tongue scrapers is that they are less likely to hit the back of the throat and cause the gag reflex. They are by no means necessary though, since the same results can be accomplished with a regular old

toothbrush. If you choose to pick up a tongue scraper, it's best to consider adopting its use as a part of your oral hygiene arsenal, which includes:

- Brushing teeth twice a day.
- Flossing.
- Using mouthwash.
- Drinking plenty of water.
- Regularly visiting the dentist.

So, since there's truth in what both you and your friend thought, why not buy *each other* some ice cream? Enjoy!

Alice!

Category:

[General Health](#) [2]

[Oral Health](#) [3]

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[Kissing with "morning breath"](#) [6]

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[3] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/category/oral-health>

[4] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/answered-questions/what-should-i-look-mouthwash-0>

[5] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/answered-questions/minimizing-morning-breath-0>

[6] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/answered-questions/kissing-morning-breath-0>