

Dental Hygiene Month

October is National Dental Hygiene Awareness Month—a great time to learn the importance of good oral health and encourage children and adults to take care of their teeth and gums. Skipping on your oral hygiene routine leads to plaque build-up, which can lead to other oral health problems, from cavities to gum disease. [The CDC says:](#)

- 1 in 4 adults aged 20-64 currently has cavities.
- Nearly half (46%) of all adults aged 30 years or older show signs of gum disease.
- Cavities are one of the most common chronic diseases of childhood in the U.S.

Oral health is more than taking care of your teeth, it's about your whole mouth. Good oral health can improve your ability to speak, smile, smell, taste, touch, chew, swallow, and make facial expressions. Poor oral hygiene can lead to other health conditions, such as cardiovascular disease, diabetes, and pneumonia. To keep your teeth, gums, and mouth healthy, brush with fluoride toothpaste twice a day, floss once a day, and visit your dentist for checkups and professional cleanings.

Even if you aren't experiencing problems, visit your dentist regularly. That way, any signs of tooth decay are addressed to prevent future oral health problems and diseases. The recommended schedule is every six months but may differ based on your age or underlying health conditions. Ask your dentist how often is right for you.

Learn more with these activities:

- **Activity 1:** The mouth-body connection
- **Activity 2:** Oral hygiene tips
- **Activity 3:** Two truths and a lie
- **Activity 4:** Children's oral health



 **Questions?** Email Wellness@Medica.com

Health disparities

“Health disparities” are preventable differences in health among different social or racial groups. Health Disparities are a complex and challenging problem across the world. Social factors play the largest role in shaping the overall health of communities. For example, the ability to access healthcare, a safe living environment, racial equity, nutritious food, quality education, and supportive relationships free of discrimination are all incredibly important to your overall health.

Those who face health disparities often have a higher risk for dental health issues. In the U.S., certain racial and ethnic groups experience barriers to dental care (e.g., affordability of out-of-pocket expenses, dental insurance, time off work for appointments, transportation, etc.), leading to unmet dental needs and a higher risk for untreated tooth decay or oral disease.

Did you know?

- Nearly 70% of Mexican American children aged 12-19 have had cavities in their permanent teeth, compared with 54% of White children.
- Children aged 2-5 from low-income households have 3 times the percentage of untreated cavities in their primary teeth than children from higher-income households.
- Nearly twice as many Black or Mexican American adults have untreated cavities as White adults.
- About 40% of adults with low income or no private health insurance have untreated cavities.
- Adults with less than a high school education are almost 3 times as likely to have untreated cavities as adults with at least some college education.

[\(Source\)](#)

For more information, please visit:

- [Oral health \(CDC\)](#)
- [Oral hygiene \(NIH\)](#)
- [What are cavities \(Colgate\)](#)



Activity 1: The mouth-body connection

The health of your mouth, teeth, and gums can affect your entire body. Your mouth is full of (mostly) harmless bacteria, but without proper care (like brushing and daily flossing), bacteria can build up on your teeth and gums, making them more susceptible to infection. Infection leads to inflammation which can lead to a breakdown in the gums and bone structure that hold the teeth in place, resulting in severe gum disease known as periodontitis. Oral bacteria and inflammation from periodontitis may also contribute to other health conditions and diseases.

Diabetes

The link between gum disease and diabetes is the strongest of all mouth-body connections. Diabetics already have trouble processing sugar due to a lack of insulin. And when there is inflammation, such as with gum disease, it weakens the body's ability to control blood sugar and further complicates matters by lessening the body's ability to use insulin. Having diabetes also increases the risk for periodontitis because high blood sugar creates ideal conditions for infection to grow. Luckily, managing one condition can help bring the other under control.

Cardiovascular disease

Heart disease and gum disease are strongly connected. Research suggests that inflammation and infections caused by oral bacteria can cause inflammation in the blood vessels, leading to raised blood pressure and an increased risk of heart attack or stroke.

Pregnancy and birth complications

Hormonal changes during pregnancy can increase a woman's risk of gum disease. Periodontitis may also be linked to premature birth and low birth weight because infection and inflammation can affect fetus development—although there are other contributing factors.

Pneumonia

Some of the bacteria in your mouth could end up in your lungs and cause pneumonia and other respiratory diseases or worsen these conditions.

Alzheimer's disease

As Alzheimer's disease progresses, oral health tends to decline.

The bottom line is that there are preventive measures you can take right now to protect your oral health and overall health. Keep your mouth, teeth, and gums healthy with the oral hygiene tips provided on the next page.

Activity 2: Oral hygiene tips

There is more to good oral health than just brushing your teeth. Keep your teeth and mouth healthy by following these oral health recommendations:



Visit your dentist regularly and develop a relationship.

The recommendation is twice per year for checkups and cleanings. Ask your dentist how often is best for you, and check your dental insurance to know your coverage. Discuss any special mouth/health conditions you have (e.g., dentures, braces, cancer treatments, pregnancy, heart disease, diabetes), and update your dentist on any health or medication changes since your last visit.



Brush, floss, and rinse.

Along with any oral health routines recommended by your dentist, brush at least twice a day (morning and before bed) for two minutes, floss daily, and rinse with an antibacterial mouth rinse—a fluoride rinse can help prevent tooth decay. These activities are essential for removing plaque, reducing bacteria, and helping to prevent gum disease and tooth decay. **Do you feel overwhelmed with all the product options?** Look for products with the American Dental Association (ADA) approval seal and ask your dentist for product recommendations.



Use fluoride.

It strengthens developing teeth in children and prevents tooth decay in both kids and adults. It is a naturally occurring mineral in drinking water but is also found in toothpaste and mouth rinse.

Note: Fluoride is safe and effective but can be hazardous if used in high doses. Parents should supervise the use of fluoride-containing products and keep fluoride products out of reach of children, especially under the age of six.



Eat a balanced diet and limit snacking.

Eat foods with fewer sugars and starches (e.g., cookies, chips, candy, soft drinks, dried fruits) and drink plenty of water. Firm/crunchy fruits and vegetables (apples, melons, carrots, cucumbers) are good choices, while acidic foods (tomatoes and citrus fruits) are best eaten with a meal. If you snack, brush and floss after you eat, or chew sugarless gum (with ADA approval seal).



Don't smoke or use tobacco products.

Smoking increases your risk of developing oral cancer, gum disease, bad breath, tooth decay, tooth loss, and other general health problems.

[Sign up for a free tobacco cessation program.](#)



Perform a self-examination of your mouth regularly.

Familiarize yourself with your mouth and teeth so that you notice changes at an early stage. Call your dentist if you notice any changes. Things to look for include spots, lesions, or swellings on your gums, tongue, cheeks, inside of your lips, and the top or bottom of your mouth. Look for signs of chipping, cracking, discoloration, or looseness of the teeth. If you develop pain, call your dentist right away.

Activity 3: Two truths and a lie

Two truths and a lie is a game where you guess which two facts are true and which is a lie. Not all the information has been covered in this toolkit—take a guess and learn something new! *Answers can be found on the last page.*

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| 1. | <ul style="list-style-type: none">a. White teeth are healthy teeth.b. Sugarless chewing gum can help keep teeth healthy, but it's not a substitute for brushing/flossing.c. Dry mouth can happen at any age and can lead to serious oral health problems. |
| 2. | <ul style="list-style-type: none">a. The teeth are the hardest substance in the human body.b. Pregnant women should pay extra attention to their dental health.c. Sugar causes cavities. The more sugar you eat, the more cavities you get. |
| 3. | <ul style="list-style-type: none">a. Sugar-free soda can hurt your teeth.b. The harder you brush, the cleaner you will keep your teeth.c. Mouthwash helps bad breath and can help keep your teeth and gums healthy. |
| 4. | <ul style="list-style-type: none">a. If you don't have cavities, you can't have gum disease.b. Natural sugars, like those found in juice, are just as harmful to your teeth as refined sugars, like those found in soda.c. Replace your toothbrush every 3 to 4 months. |
| 5. | <ul style="list-style-type: none">a. Tobacco use and diabetes are two risk factors for gum disease.b. When you brush your teeth with fluoride toothpaste or drink fluoridated water, you prevent cavities and strengthen your teeth's enamel.c. You should brush your teeth immediately after eating or drinking acidic foods. |

Activity 4: Children’s oral health guide

By age five, about 60% of children will be affected by tooth decay ([source](#)). The good news is that tooth decay is largely preventable. A sign of early decay is a white spot where minerals have been lost—at this point, tooth decay can be stopped or reversed. The enamel can repair itself with minerals from your saliva and fluoride.

As a parent or caregiver, use this oral health guide to protect your child’s teeth, prevent cavities, and keep their little smiles bright.

Take your child to the dentist for regular cleanings and checkups.

The AAPD recommends taking your child for their first dental visit by age one. Talk with the dentist about how often to schedule visits* for your child. Visits include removing plaque, checking for signs of early tooth decay, showing you and your child how to thoroughly clean their teeth, and applying fluoride.



Talk with your child’s dentist about sealants.

Dental sealants* are thin, plastic coatings applied to the back teeth (molars) to form a barrier that protects and prevents food and bacteria from getting trapped.

Brush and floss.

Brush twice per day (morning and before bed) or as directed by a dentist or physician (adult to assist until age seven). Floss as soon as your child has two teeth that touch, usually around two or three (adult to assist until age 10).

- **Babies:** Wipe gums with a soft, clean cloth to remove bacteria and sugars that can cause cavities. Once teeth start to come in, use a small soft-bristled toothbrush and plain water. If using toothpaste, use no more than a smear or the size of a grain of rice. For children under two, ask your child’s doctor or dentist about fluoride toothpaste.
- **Children three and up:** Brush with fluoride toothpaste, using no more than the size of a pea. Supervise and assist your child with brushing to minimize the swallowing of toothpaste and help get teeth clean. See our [ten tips to make brushing more fun for kids](#).

Use fluoride.

It strengthens developing teeth and prevents tooth decay. You can get fluoride by drinking fluoridated water from a [community water supply](#) and brushing with fluoride toothpaste. If your water comes from a private well, your children may need fluoride supplements—ask your child’s doctor or dentist. Your child’s dentist may also recommend applying a fluoride varnish* or using a fluoride mouth rinse.

Watch what and how often they eat.

- **Limit snacking between meals** to reduce the number of times acid comes in contact with teeth. If providing snacks, offer healthy options like vegetables and fruit.
- **Limit fruit juice.** Follow the [daily juice recommendations](#) from AAPD.
- **Save candy, cookies, soda, and other sugary drinks for special occasions.**
- **Don’t allow eating or drinking (except for water) after bedtime teeth brushing.**

Remember that children imitate what the adults in their life model for them. Lead by example and follow a healthy dental care routine yourself, and they will too!

**Talk with your dental insurance carrier about your coverage.*

Ten tips to make brushing fun for kids:

1. Brush with them.
2. Let them brush your teeth.
3. Let them finish. After you've brushed their teeth, let them practice.
4. Give them options.
5. Let them choose their own toothbrush and toothpaste flavor.
6. Give them two choices: "What do you want to do first—brush your teeth or put on PJs?" or "Should we brush your teeth now or after we clean up?"
7. Reward them for brushing. It can be as simple as a sticker chart with a larger reward after a week or month of good brushing.
8. Have a "play" toothbrush they can use on their dolls or stuffed animals.
9. Make it a game. Use a flashlight to check that you brushed all the "sugar bugs" away.
10. Pair it with a song or rhyme. Search for a two-minute toothbrushing song/rhyme. Here's one sung to the tune of "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star".



*Got my toothpaste, got my brush
I won't hurry, I won't rush
Making sure my teeth are clean
Front and back and in between.
When I brush for quite a while
I will have a happy smile!*

Answer key

1 = A is false. Having a white smile does not mean your mouth is healthy. Two primary indicators of good oral health are zero cavities and fresh breath. Teeth whitening does not clean teeth and is not recommended for everyone—talk with your dentist first.
2 = C is false. Sugar by itself does not cause cavities; the acid that is produced by the cavity-causing bacteria causes cavities. How long sugar is in contact with your teeth is more important than how much sugar you eat.
3 = B is false. Brushing too hard or using a hard toothbrush can actually wear down the surface of your teeth and gums. Gently brush your teeth and gums for at least 2 minutes with a soft-bristle brush. Brush your tongue too, to rid bacteria and keep your breath fresh.
4 = A is false. Being cavity-free doesn't mean your gums are healthy. Gums that bleed easily or are red, swollen or tender is a sign of gingivitis—the earliest stage of gum disease and the only stage that is reversible.
5 = C is false. Brushing right after consuming acid foods can do more damage, pushing it deeper into the enamel of your teeth. Rinse your mouth with water after eating acidic foods and wait 30 minutes to 1 hour to brush.