

Top Tips for Good Oral Health

Good oral health involves taking care of your mouth, teeth and gums. However, good oral health is also important for your overall health and well-being, as it allows you to eat, speak and smile without pain, discomfort or embarrassment.

Tooth decay and gum disease are the most common oral diseases¹.

- **Tooth decay** occurs when dental plaque (containing bacteria) turns sugars into acid, causing damage to the teeth. This can lead to cavities (holes) in the teeth, as well as gum disease.
- **Gum disease** can result in red, swollen and painful gums. The early stage of gum disease, called gingivitis, has symptoms such as red and swollen gums and bleeding gums after brushing or flossing teeth. If this develops into the more severe form, called periodontitis, your teeth can become loose and potentially fall out or gum abscesses may form.

Luckily both tooth decay and gum disease are largely preventable with some lifestyle changes!



Brush your teeth with a fluoride toothpaste:

- You should brush your teeth twice a day for at least 2 minutes, covering all surfaces of your teeth.
- Replace toothbrushes once the bristles are frayed, typically around every 3 months.

- Pick a toothpaste containing fluoride. This helps to prevent tooth decay through remineralising tooth enamel. Different strengths of fluoride toothpaste are recommended for different age groups² (this information can be found on the back of toothpaste labels, with the strength given as parts per million (ppm)):
 - **Under 3 years:** use a smear of toothpaste containing at least 1000ppm fluoride.
 - **3 – 6 years:** use a pea-sized amount of toothpaste containing more than 1000ppm.
 - **7+ years:** use a toothpaste containing 1300-1500ppm fluoride.
- Spit, but don't rinse after brushing! This dilutes any fluoride remaining on the teeth, reducing its protective effect.
- If using a mouthwash, don't use it after brushing as this will have the same diluting effect as rinsing with water. Instead choose to use a mouthwash at a different time (e.g. after lunch).

Floss between your teeth:

- Using floss (or an interdental brush) will help to remove plaque and food from between the teeth and other areas your toothbrush can miss.
- This helps to prevent plaque building up and keeps gums healthy!

Limit your free sugar intake:

- Free sugars are the sugars added to food, as well as the sugars that are naturally found in honey, syrups and unsweetened fruit and vegetable juices.
 - *The sugars that are naturally found in intact fruits and vegetables (i.e. not juiced) and in unsweetened milk/milk products are **not** free sugars.*

Factsheet

- It is recommended that we should consume **fewer than 5%** of our daily energy from free sugars³. This is equal to around:
 - **4-6 years:** 19g (or 5 teaspoons)
 - **7-10 years:** 24g (or 6 teaspoons)
 - **11+ years:** 30g (or 7 teaspoons)
- If consuming foods and drinks containing sugars, these should be limited between mealtimes to help prevent tooth decay.
- Be aware that fizzy drinks can also cause tooth damage even if they do not contain sugars, due to their acidity. The safest drinks for teeth are water and plain milk.
- Use food labels to help choose food and drinks lower in sugar. Also check the ingredients lists because the higher sugar, syrups, molasses or nectars are on the list, the more sugar that product contains!



Maintain a healthy lifestyle:

- Avoid smoking as it increases the risk of gum disease developing⁴.
- Avoid excessive alcohol consumption and stick to the recommended guidelines⁵: having no more than 14 units of alcohol per week, spread over the week with at least 2 alcohol-free days. The sugars and acids in alcoholic drinks, as well as their mixers, can lead to tooth decay.
- Smoking and alcohol consumption are linked to an increased risk of developing mouth cancer; with this risk increasing in those who do both⁶.
- Staining is typically not harmful to teeth; however, it may lead to feeling self-conscious. Tea, coffee, red wine and fizzy drinks are all common drinks that cause staining.

Register with a dentist and attend regularly:

- Regular check-ups allow the dentist to check for signs of early decay and if necessary they can restore teeth before decay progresses. They can also give advice, offer preventative treatments and check for signs of early mouth cancer.
- If you are not registered, all you need to do is phone or visit a practice if your area and ask if you are able to register with them!

References:

1. Scottish Health Survey. 2018. Dental Health. Available at: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/scottish-health-survey-2017-volume-1-main-report/pages/42/>
2. NHS. 2018. Fluoride. Available at: <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/fluoride/>
3. Public Health England. 2015. SACN Why 5%? Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/sacns-sugars-and-health-recommendations-why-5>
4. CDC. 2020. Gum Disease. Available at: <https://www.cdc.gov/tobacco/campaign/tips/diseases/periodontal-gum-disease.html>
5. NHS Tayside. 2014. Recommended Drinking Limits. Available at: https://www.nhstayside.scot.nhs.uk/OurServicesA-Z/AlcoholBriefIntervention/PROD_209584/index.htm
6. Cancer Research. 2018. Mouth Cancer: Risks and Causes: Available at: <https://www.cancerresearchuk.org/about-cancer/mouth-cancer/risks-causes>