



Pharmaceutical  
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# Oral Health

## Teeth and gum care

**Plaque is the most common cause of tooth decay and gum disease. Regular, effective brushing and flossing can remove plaque and help keep teeth and gums healthy. Regular dental checks are also important. Dentists and dental hygienists can advise on teeth and gum care and detect decay before any significant damage occurs.**

Plaque is a thin sticky film of saliva, bacteria and food that builds up on teeth. The bacteria ferment sugars in the food, producing acids that may erode tooth enamel. Plaque bacteria can also damage gums.

Plaque can be removed by brushing and flossing, but it quickly re-forms. Plaque that stays on teeth longer than a few days may harden into tartar (calculus) that acts as a reservoir for bacteria. Tartar needs to be removed by a dentist.

### Tooth decay (dental caries)

Tooth decay is caused by acids produced by plaque bacteria and may lead to a cavity (hole) in the tooth.

#### Symptoms include:

When decay starts there may be no symptoms, but as it progresses symptoms can include:

- Toothache
- Pain when eating or drinking something sweet, hot or cold
- Pain when biting down
- Visible holes or pits in tooth.

#### Treatments may include:

- A filling – fills the cavity
- A crown – covers and protects the whole tooth
- Root canal therapy – removes the tooth's inner pulp and replaces it with a filling
- Tooth extraction.

### Gum disease (periodontal disease)

Periodontal disease affects the gums and other tissues that hold and support teeth. The most common cause is bacteria in plaque and tartar. The mildest form of gum disease is called gingivitis and the more advanced form is called periodontitis.

#### Symptoms include:

- Red, swollen and bleeding gums
- Bad breath or a bad taste in the mouth
- Receding gums
- Sensitive teeth or gums
- Loose teeth.

#### Treatment includes:

- Plaque and tartar removal by a dentist
- Regular and thorough tooth brushing and flossing.

### Factors affecting tooth and gum health include:

- Teeth and gum cleaning habits
- Eating and drinking habits – frequently eating and drinking foods that contain sugars or acids may increase the risk of tooth decay. Try to limit these foods to meal times
- Fluoride – fluoride is a mineral that strengthens tooth enamel. In Australia, fluoride is added to the mains water supply to help prevent tooth decay. Bottled and filtered water may not contain this extra fluoride
- Dry mouth – saliva helps protect against tooth decay. Reduced saliva flow can increase the risk of decay
- Smoking – increases the risks of developing gum disease and oral cancer
- Some medicines (e.g., asthma inhalers). Ask a pharmacist
- Some medical conditions (e.g., diabetes, eating disorders)
- Recreational and illicit drugs.

## Self care

Ways to prevent tooth decay and gum disease include:

- Brush your teeth at least twice a day, in the morning and at bedtime. If you can't brush after eating, rinse your mouth with water
- Floss or clean between teeth every day
- Use a fluoride toothpaste. Low fluoride children's toothpaste is recommended for children aged 18 months to 6 years. Children under 18 months should not use toothpaste
- Drink plenty of tap water for its fluoride content
- Limit how often you (and your children) have foods and drinks containing sugars and acids (e.g., soft drinks)
- Limit alcohol and caffeine intake
- Don't smoke
- Have your teeth checked regularly.

## Related fact cards

- *Dry Mouth*
- *Mouth Ulcers*

## For more information

**A dentist** – listed under 'D' in the yellow pages of the phone book.

**Australian Dental Association** – website [www.ada.org.au](http://www.ada.org.au)

**HEALTH/insite** – website [www.healthinsite.gov.au](http://www.healthinsite.gov.au)

**Consumer Medicine Information (CMI)** leaflets – your pharmacist can advise on availability.

**NPS Medicines Line** – phone 1300 888 763 Monday to Friday, 9am to 6pm EST.

**The Poisons Information Centre** – phone 131 126 from anywhere in Australia.

Pharmacists are medicines experts. Ask a pharmacist for advice when choosing a medicine.

## Important

Have your teeth checked by a dentist or hygienist at least once (or preferably twice) every year.

Consult a dentist promptly if you have:

- Tooth, gum or jaw pain
- Red, swollen or bleeding gums
- Sensitivity to sweet, hot or cold foods or drinks
- Gums that are pulling away from your teeth
- Pus around your teeth and gums
- A bad taste in your mouth
- Unexplained bad breath
- Changes in the feel of your teeth or dentures.

Your **Self Care** Pharmacist

## A brushing technique recommended by dentists

### Regular toothbrush:

- Use a brush with a small head and soft bristles
- Place your toothbrush at a 45-degree angle to your teeth, aiming the bristles toward the gum line
- Jiggle the brush *gently* back and forward, brushing one or two teeth at a time
- Brush your tongue.

### Electric toothbrush:

- Use a brush with a small round head with soft bristles
- Gently guide the brush from tooth to tooth at the gumline on the inside and outside surfaces
- Brush your tongue.

Replace your brush or brush head when it becomes frayed.

## A flossing technique recommended by dentists

Flossing cleans between teeth. It is best to floss just before brushing.

- Gently ease the dental floss or tape between your teeth.
- Pull the ends of the floss or tape against the front and back surface of a tooth so that it forms a "C" as it wraps around the tooth.
- Gently pull the floss or tape from the gumline to the top of the tooth, using a gentle sawing motion against the side of the tooth.
- Use fresh floss or tape as you progress through your teeth.

If you have trouble getting floss between your teeth, try waxed floss. If it's hard to manipulate the floss, try a floss holder. If you have larger spaces between teeth, you may use an Interproximal brush.

## Dental emergencies

### Toothache

- Place a cold compress onto cheek to reduce swelling.
- Take a pain relieving medicine if needed. Swallow the medicine, do not place on the tooth.
- Consult a dentist immediately.

### Knocked out tooth

- Hold tooth by the crown (not roots). If dirty, rinse tooth in milk (preferably) or water or have patient suck it clean.
- Put tooth back in its socket. If not possible, wrap in plastic clingwrap or place in milk or inside patient's cheek.
- Consult a dentist immediately.

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