



Dental Health: A Guide for Teens

Brushing your teeth twice a day is important to keep your teeth clean, but did you know that eating nutritious foods and not smoking can also keep your mouth and gums healthy? Read on to learn more about factors that contribute to gum and oral health problems and what you can do to keep your mouth healthy.

What is oral health?

Oral health (*also known as dental health*) is caring for your mouth which includes your teeth, gums, and tongue.

What can I do to keep my mouth healthy?

- Gently brush the inside and outside surfaces of your teeth at least twice a day but it's best to brush after every meal and before you go to sleep. If it isn't convenient to brush your teeth after every meal, try chewing sugar-free gum to help keep your teeth clean.
- Eat healthy foods from all the different food groups—Be sure to eat lots of fruits and vegetables. Poor nutrition can cause puffy or inflamed gums.
- Avoid piercing areas of your mouth (*tongue, lips, etc.*). Oral piercings of the tongue, lip, etc. can cause infections, bleeding, and nerve damage in the mouth. They can also damage tooth enamel or break teeth.
- Don't smoke or use chewing tobacco. Smoking and chewing tobacco can stain your teeth and gums and add to the tarter build-up on your teeth. Chewing tobacco can get stuck in between your teeth and can cause swelling of the gums, irritation, and bad breath. Anyone who smokes or chews tobacco is at risk for getting oral cancer.
- Limit sugary and sticky food such as Fruit Snacks®, raisins, lollipops, and other candy. Sugary and sticky foods can get stuck in between your teeth, which can lead to cavities.

How often do I need to change my toothbrush?

Toothbrushes are effective in removing plaque from your teeth and gums. You should change your tooth brush about every three months or sooner if you are sick with the flu, cold, or mouth infection.

Keeping Your Teeth Clean

Most teens know that brushing their teeth everyday can help prevent cavities. But did you know that brushing too hard actually wears away the surface of your teeth and can damage tooth enamel? Keep reading to learn more about dental health and why it is important to take good care of your teeth and gums.

Why is it important to brush my teeth?

Brushing and flossing gets rid of plaque, which is the main cause of tooth decay and gum disease.

What are plaque and tartar?

Plaque is the breakdown of food that coats teeth. If the plaque is not removed every day with brushing, it can harden and turn into tarter. Tarter, a hard crusty deposit that forms on teeth, is much harder to remove than plaque, but can be removed at dental visits. If tarter is not removed, it can cause gum disease.

How often should I brush my teeth?

You should brush your teeth at least twice a day for at least 2 minutes; once after breakfast and again before you go to sleep at night. Brushing after each meal is best.

How should I brush my teeth?

You can use a watch with a second hand to help you get in the habit of brushing your teeth for a full 2 minutes (*each time you brush*). Don't forget to brush all of your back teeth and gum lines.

* Use a soft bristled toothbrush (*regular or battery operated*).

- Brush gently. Brushing too hard wears away the tooth surface.
- Brush the inside and outside surfaces of your teeth.
- Brush the areas over your gum line where your teeth meet the gums.
- Don't forget to brush your tongue daily too! This will remove caked on food, bacteria and help keep your breath fresh!

What causes bad breath?

Bad breath happens when food gets trapped between your teeth. When the food breaks down it releases bacteria. It is the bacteria that has a bad odor and causes bad breath. Smoking also causes bad breath.

Why is flossing important?

Flossing daily is just as important as brushing your teeth. In fact, flossing removes plaque under your gum line and between your teeth that your toothbrush cannot reach. Here are some reasons why flossing is important.

- Flossing helps get rid of bad breath.
- Flossing removes food particles between teeth that brushing cannot remove.
- Flossing helps prevent cavities and gum disease by removing plaque.

Is there anything I can do to prevent bad breath?

Most teens don't know that using mints and mouthwash is only a temporary way to control bad breath. Rinsing your mouth with water after you brush and floss can actually be more effective. In most cases, bad breath can be improved just by working on your dental hygiene and not smoking.

- Brush your teeth for at least 2 minutes twice a day; after breakfast and before bed.
- Floss every day.
- Brush your tongue. This will remove most of the bacteria that causes bad breath.
- Don't smoke or chew tobacco. Smoking causes bad breath and may lead to gum disease. Smoking and chewing tobacco also puts you at risk for getting oral cancer.

Remember these important tips and visit your dentist for regular check-ups and cleanings every 6 months.

Cavities

No one likes cavities! Did you know that the best way to avoid getting them is preventing them? Read on to learn more.

What are cavities?

Another word for a dental "cavity" is "caries". A cavity is a hole in a tooth that is caused by tooth decay. Any of the following can affect whether or not you will develop a cavity:

- Lifestyle (*i.e* smoking)
- Dental Hygiene
- Eating Habits
- Fluoride in water and toothpaste

To understand how a tooth decays, let's find out what is naturally in your mouth.

Saliva—keeps teeth and oral tissue moist, washes away food particles left behind when we eat, and protects against viruses and bacteria.

Plaque—is a soft gooey substance, a mixture of bacteria, food debris, white blood cells, and body tissue, that grows when bacteria sticks to teeth. Plaque is removed with brushing but begins to form again right after you brush your teeth.

Tartar—forms when plaque absorbs calcium and minerals from the saliva in your mouth. These minerals form crystals which cause plaque to harden and become "tarter".

Bacteria—(*some bacteria*) actually help control destructive bacteria. Bacteria that cause tooth decay can do a lot of damage by making acids that wears away tooth enamel.

How does a cavity form?

The sugar in all carbohydrates (*example: potato chips, bananas, pretzels*), specifically sweet and sticky foods (*cookies and soft drinks*) react with the bacteria in your mouth. This reaction produces acid. This acid causes the mineral crystals to dissolve the tooth enamel, the outer protective layer of your tooth.

A cavity does not form unless tooth decay breaks through the outer protective layer (the enamel) of the tooth. The good news is you can prevent cavities from forming!

How do I know if I have a cavity?

Cavities are usually found on the chewing surfaces of your teeth, and between your teeth and near the gum line. If a cavity develops below the surface of a tooth, you won't necessarily be able to see it. However, if a cavity forms on the biting surface of a tooth, it will look brown or blackish. Just because a tooth doesn't hurt doesn't mean that it's not decayed. Sometimes the biggest cavities are completely painless. If you don't see a dentist and get treated, **a cavity can:**

- Destroy your tooth
- Kill delicate nerves that are in the roots of your teeth
- Cause an abscess or an infection within the tip of a tooth

Your dentist can tell if you have any cavities with:

Regular check-ups: Using a metal instrument called an "explorer" your dentist will check your teeth for soft spots. A tooth with tooth decay is usually softer than a tooth without decay. Healthy tooth enamel is hard.

Cavity-dye detection: Your dentist uses an instrument that has a tip like a small toothbrush that brushes special non-toxic dye over your teeth. The dye sticks to the areas that have tooth decay.

X-rays: These special photos can show tooth decay that does not show on the surface of a tooth.

If your dentist finds that you have tooth decay, you will need to have a filling.

Getting a filling:

- The area where the cavity is located, will be numbed with a gel, special numbing liquid or both.
- After your tooth and the area around it is numb (*you won't feel anything*), the tooth decay will be removed and space will be made for a filling to replace what was removed with a special tool.
- Lastly, your dentist will put special material (*a filling*) into the hole or "cavity" to protect the nerves of your tooth.

Does getting a filling hurt?

Getting a filling shouldn't hurt because your tooth and area around the tooth will not have any feeling (*because of the numbing medicine*). If the numbing

medicine is given as a shot, you will feel a mild sting for a couple of seconds as the medicine goes into the gum area around the tooth. You will likely feel some pressure when your dentist is working in your mouth, but you shouldn't feel any pain. If you do, tell your dentist!

Will my mouth hurt after the filling?

Some people are sensitive to air, cold or hot drinks, and/or sugary foods for a couple of days after having dental work but the sensitivity shouldn't last any more than 1–2 weeks. Be sure to tell your dentist if your mouth doesn't feel right.

How can I help prevent cavities?

- **Use fluoride toothpaste everyday**—Fluoride toothpaste keeps your teeth strong and healthy.
- **Get sealants from your dentist**—A sealant is a protective coating placed over the top of the teeth you use to chew with (premolars and molars). They work by preventing bacteria and acids from sticking to the chewing surfaces of your teeth.
- **Brush Regularly and Floss Daily**—it gets rid of the bacteria in your mouth.
- **Use a daily fluoride rinse** such as ACT®.
- **Avoid sugary and sticky foods** which can lead to cavities.

Wisdom Teeth

If you go to your dentist for regular check-ups, you will likely know if your wisdom teeth have come in or if they are impacted. If your dentist thinks you need to have your wisdom teeth removed, you will probably need to make an appointment with an oral surgeon (a doctor who is trained to do surgery that involves gums and teeth) for an evaluation. Some people never have any problems with their wisdom teeth, and some people never even form wisdom teeth.

What are wisdom teeth?

Wisdom teeth are the last molars to develop. They are located on each side of the jaw in the very back. By the time you are between 16–19 years old, you should be able to see them. If you can't, they may be impacted, meaning they haven't broken through the gums yet, or they may be completely absent. Wisdom teeth are the last permanent teeth to come in so there is often not enough room for them to grow into your mouth completely. These

trapped or impacted wisdom teeth will most likely need to be removed by an oral surgeon.

How can I tell if I have wisdom teeth?

You may not even realize that you have wisdom teeth or that they may even be impacted. During a regular check-up, your dentist will take an x-ray to find out where your wisdom teeth are located and if they are impacted.

Be sure to tell your dentist if you have any of the following symptoms:

- Trouble opening your jaw
- Pain when you bite or chew
- Swollen gums at the back of your mouth or near the side of your jaw
- Irritation or pain when you open your mouth

Why are wisdom teeth removed?

Wisdom teeth are usually removed if they become impacted or if they are crowding other teeth. This means your wisdom teeth either don't break through your gums or they only partially break through. **Impacted or trapped wisdom teeth can cause problems such as:**

- **Pain** on one or both sides of your mouth—with or without eating
- **Infection**—food and bacteria can get stuck in the partial opening or flap around the trapped wisdom tooth and can cause swelling of the gums
- **Movement of teeth** and change in bite
- **Benign (harmless) cysts** or tumors of the jaw

What should I expect if I find out that my wisdom teeth are a problem?

Your dentist and/or oral surgeon will give you specific instructions to follow. **Below is a summary of what you might expect to happen if you need to have your wisdom teeth removed.**

- Your dentist will likely have you make an appointment with an oral surgeon to have your wisdom teeth removed.
- Your oral surgeon will talk to you about the procedure and what anesthesia or sedatives (*medication that make you relaxed and put you to sleep*) will be used.
- An x-ray will be taken so that the oral surgeon can remove your tooth/teeth the best way. A panoramic x-ray (*an x-ray of your whole mouth*)

will be taken of all of your wisdom teeth as well as the teeth around them. Some people get all of their wisdom teeth removed to prevent any future problems.

- Some oral surgeons prescribe antibiotics before or after surgery. For example; if you have an infection, or a weak immune system.
- It is best to wear a short sleeve top or one with sleeves you can roll up easily as you will likely have an IV (*intravenous—small tube in your arm that will give your body medicine and fluids when you are asleep*).
- You will not be able to eat or drink for 6 hours before your procedure.

How are wisdom teeth removed?

Simple extraction— If your wisdom tooth or teeth are not impacted but you need to still need to have them removed, you may be able to have them taken out with a local anesthetic. Using a very small needle, your dentist will inject numbing medicine into the gum area around the tooth/teeth that need to be removed. The wisdom tooth/teeth are then removed using a special dental instrument.

Surgical extraction— This procedure is used if your wisdom tooth/teeth are impacted (*completely covered by the gum and bone of your jaw*) or partially impacted (*partly covered*) Before the procedure your dentist or oral surgeon will inject a local anesthetic (*numbing medicine*) into the gum area around the tooth/teeth that will be removed, Next you may be given IV medicine or general anesthesia in a hospital operating room (*medicine that will put you to sleep so you won't be awake during the procedure*). Your oral surgeon may need to make a small cut into your gum to remove your tooth/teeth.

What is recovery like?

You will likely be mild to moderately uncomfortable after you have your wisdom teeth removed, but the pain or discomfort should only last for a couple of days. It is important to follow the specific instructions that your dentist or oral surgeon give you. **The information below is an example of what your recovery might be like.**

- After the incision is made and the wisdom tooth or teeth are taken out, you will be given a piece of gauze to bite down on. You will need to bite down on the gauze for 20–30 minutes so that a blood clot can form. You will be given gauze pads to take home so you can change the pads as they

become wet with blood. It is common for the area to bleed on and off for the next 24 hours.

- If your oral surgeon had to cut your gum to get your tooth/teeth out, you may have “stitches”. Depending on the kind of stitches you have you may or may not have to have them removed. Some stitches need to be removed by your oral surgeon when the gum has healed and some dissolve on their own.

Do:

- Prop your head up with pillows instead of lying flat.
- Use an icepack on your face to help with pain or any swelling.
- Continue to brush and floss your teeth carefully, but stay clear of the extraction areas.
- Take the medicine prescribed by your oral surgeon for pain.
- Talk to your oral surgeon about replacing your pain prescription with over-the-counter pain relievers, such as acetaminophen (Tylenol®), or ibuprofen (Motrin®) as your pain improves.
- **Eat “soft” foods** such as yogurt, gelatin, pudding, and macaroni & cheese.
- **Rinse your mouth** every couple of hours with about 1 cup of warm water and ½ teaspoon of salt and spit out (don't swallow). This will help prevent infections.
- Follow the directions your dentist and/or oral surgeon give you so that you can lower the chance of any pain or future problems. Full healing takes about 1–2 weeks.
- Call your oral surgeon if you have a fever or if the pain doesn't lessen in a few days.

Don't:

- Don't smoke for at least 24 hours after an extraction. A good time to stop forever!
- Don't use a straw to drink.
- Don't drink very hot liquids.
- Don't eat foods with little seeds (*sesame seeds, poppy seeds*) or small grains (*rice*) that may get stuck in the tooth sockets.

Are there any risks involved when having my wisdom teeth removed?

Having wisdom teeth removed rarely causes big problems, but with any surgery, there are possible risks involved.

Pain and Dry Socket– About 5% of extractions result in “dry socket” (*when a blood clot does not form in the hole where the tooth was removed and the bone underneath becomes exposed to air and/or food*). A dry socket can be very painful and may need to be treated with a special dressing so that the area can heal.

Bleeding that is heavy or that lasts longer than 24 hours– some bleeding is normal during the first 24 hours but it should not be heavy and it should stop within a day.

Numbness– It is normal for your mouth, chin and possibly your lips to feel numb until the anesthesia or local anesthetic (*numbing medicine*) wears off. If your lower lip and chin continue to feel numb, there may have been some irritation to a nerve in your jaw. This is more common when your lower wisdom teeth are removed. It may take 3–6 months for a nerve to heal and in rare cases it can be permanent.

Damage to teeth next to or near your wisdom teeth– It doesn't happen very often, but occasionally a nearby tooth/teeth can get damaged.

Damage to existing dental work (*crowns, etc.*) close to your wisdom teeth.

If you have any of these symptoms after you have your wisdom teeth removed, it is very important for you to tell your oral surgeon!

How much does it cost to have wisdom teeth removed?

If you have dental insurance, the cost of having your wisdom teeth removed will either be partially or completely covered. General health insurance sometimes will cover dental procedures as well. Depending on what type of general health insurance you have, it may cover all or part of the procedure. Be sure you talk to your dental and or Health Insurance Company **BEFORE** your oral surgery to find out about the kind of coverage you have and how much you will have to pay out of pocket!

It is more common for problems with wisdom teeth to develop during the teen and early adult years, but you may never have any problems with your wisdom teeth. The most important thing to remember is to take care of your teeth (brush and floss regularly) and see your dentist for regular checkups.

Braces

If you have been told by your dentist that your teeth are *not aligned correctly* or *your teeth are too crowded*, you may need braces. Braces are the most common way to fix crooked and/or crowded teeth and help align the jaw (*keep it in the right position*). Your dentist will likely have you make an appointment with an orthodontist (*a dentist who specializes in braces*) to find out if braces are right for you.

What are braces?

Braces are bands, wires, and brackets that hold the teeth in place. The good news is that braces and bands can be stylish. They now come in different colors and some are almost invisible.

How do braces work?

Braces work by slowly moving and straightening your teeth so they have enough space and they are aligned properly. The wires apply pressure to your teeth to cause them to move in the right direction and the rubber bands help line up your teeth to make them straighter. Braces usually need to be adjusted about once a month.

How long will I have braces?

Since everybody's teeth are different, it may take a few months to years to correct teeth that are not straight.

What do I do when I get my new braces?

Your mouth will likely be sore for 1–2 days after you get your new braces. Chewing hard foods may be painful so it is best to stick with soft foods for 24–48 hours. It is also a good idea to eat soft foods on the days that you have your braces adjusted or tightened. For example: macaroni and cheese, soups, oatmeal, mashed potatoes.

Foods to stay away from in general, when you have braces:

- Hard Foods—nuts or hard candy
- Sticky Foods—gum or candy
- Chewy or Crunchy Food—bagels or apples or licorice

Ways to relieve soreness of your mouth:

- Rinse your mouth with warm water and ½ teaspoon of salt and spit out (*do not swallow*).
- Ask your orthodontist if it's okay to take Acetaminophen (*Tylenol®*) for pain
- Talk to your orthodontist about using special dental “wax” over areas of your braces that cause irritation to your lips, cheeks, tongue, or gums

How often will I need to see my orthodontist?

When you meet with your orthodontist, he/she will tell you how often you should come back for follow-up visits. You will need to have regular check-ups to see how the braces are working and to adjust or tighten them. Tightening your braces keeps your teeth straight and moving in the right direction.

Do I still need to floss my teeth?

Yes! It is extra important for you to take good care of your teeth when you have braces because food and bacteria can get stuck. Brushing and flossing will help prevent cavities, and keep your gums healthy. Your orthodontist or assistant will show you how to brush and floss your teeth.

What is life like after braces?

After you get your braces taken off, you will probably need to wear a retainer. A retainer is a “dental appliance” that helps your teeth stay in place and prevents them from moving. Your orthodontist will let you know how long you will need to wear your retainer because it can be different with each person.

Here are some tips to remember when you are wearing a retainer:

- Take the retainer out when you eat.
- Use your toothbrush, toothpaste and warm water to clean your retainer once a day. This gets rid of trapped food, bacteria and any odors.
- When you are not wearing your retainer, keep it in a retainer case.

- Don't wrap your retainer in tissue or a napkin, as you are apt to throw it away by mistake.
- Take your retainer out when you swim.
- Keep your retainer away from hot water and hot temperatures– it's made of a plastic material and could melt.
- Wear a mouth guard over your braces, if you play sports.
- Bring your retainer to every orthodontist appointment.

How much do braces cost?

Braces can be pricey depending on whether you have dental insurance or not. It's a good idea to ask your parent(s) or guardian if you have dental insurance. If you do, you can find an orthodontist on your plan. You should also ask your dental insurance provider how much they will pay for braces. Most orthodontists will set up a payment plan to help with expenses.