

# Dental Hygiene Awareness

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. Skimping on your oral hygiene routine leads to plaque build-up, which can lead to other oral health problems, from cavities to gum disease. [According to the CDC:](#)

- 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.

Your oral health is essential to your overall health and well-being. The [Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion](#) (ODPHP) suggests that good oral health can improve your ability to speak, smile, smell, taste, touch, chew, swallow and make facial expressions to show emotions! Studies have shown that bad oral hygiene can lead to other health conditions, such as cardiovascular disease, diabetes, and pneumonia.

Even if you aren't experiencing tooth problems or toothache, visit your dentist for regular checkups and cleanings. This way, any signs of tooth decay can be taken care of early and help to prevent any oral health problems and diseases down the road. The recommended interval is every six months but may differ based on age or underlying health conditions. Talk with your dentist about what frequency of visits is right for you.

## Participate in the following activities to learn more:



**Activity #1:  
The Mouth-Body  
Connection**

**Activity #2:  
Oral Hygiene Tips**

**Activity #3:  
Two Truths and A  
Lie**

**Activity #4:  
Children's Oral  
Health**

For questions or more information, email [dhp.health@deancare.com](mailto:dhp.health@deancare.com).

# Activity 1: The Mouth-Body Connection

Oral health is more important than you might realize. Your mouth is the gateway to your entire body and provides a window to your overall health. The health of your mouth, teeth, and gums can positively or negatively affect your whole body. Learn about the connection below:

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 make your gums 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 periodontitis 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**

Although not fully understood why 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 increased risk for 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 many other contributing factors.

- **Pneumonia**

Some of the bacteria in your mouth could end up in your lungs and cause pneumonia, 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 do right now to protect your oral health and overall health. Keep your mouth, teeth, and gums healthy with our Oral Hygiene Tips in Activity #2 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 throughout your lifetime and potentially prevent other health conditions from developing 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 what frequency is best for you and check your dental insurance to know your coverage. Discuss any special mouth/health conditions you might have (e.g., dentures, braces, cancer treatments, pregnancy, heart disease, diabetes), and be sure to update your dentist on any health or medication changes since your last visit.

- **Brush, Floss, Rinse.**

Along with any additional oral health routines developed with 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 to 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 advice on 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 6.

- **Eat a balanced diet and limit snacking.**

Eat foods that contain 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 do snack, brush and floss teeth after 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 tobacco cessation program.](#)

- **Perform a self-examination of your mouth regularly.**

Familiarize yourself with the appearance of your mouth and teeth so that you notice changes at an early stage. Have changes examined by your dentist. 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 as soon as possible.

# 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 one is a lie. The information may or may not have been addressed in this packet, so just guess and learn something new!

1.
  - 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.

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2.
  - 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.

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3.
  - 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.

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4.
  - 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.

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5.
  - 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 are preventing cavities and strengthening your teeth's enamel.
  - c. You should brush your teeth immediately after eating or drinking acidic foods.

Answer Key

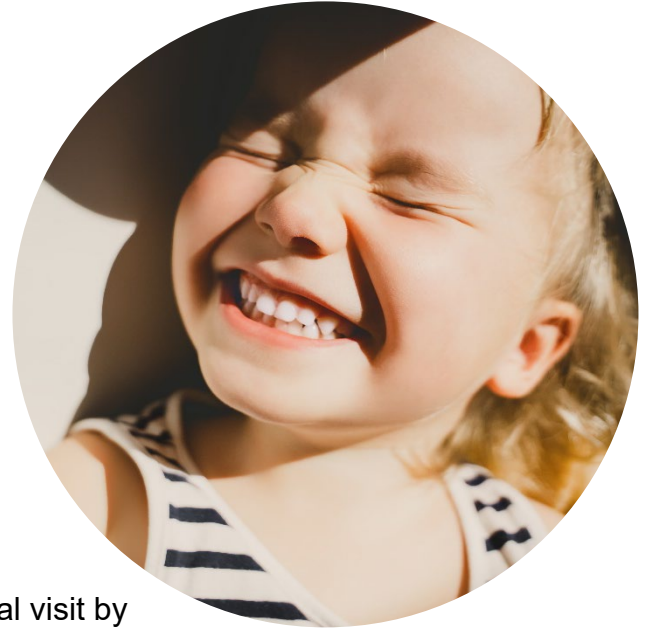
1 = A is false. Having a white smile does not mean your mouth is healthy. Two primary indicators of good oral health are zero cavities and fresh breath. Teeth whitening does not clean teeth and is not recommended for everyone—talk with your dentist first.  
2 = C is false. Sugar by itself does not cause 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.



# Activity 4: Children's Oral Health Guide

By the age of 5, 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 a child for their first dental visit by age one. Talk with the dentist about the frequency of ongoing visits\* and check your dental insurance to know your coverage. Visits will include removing dental plaque, checking for signs of early tooth decay, showing you and your child how to thoroughly clean their teeth, and applying fluoride varnish, if needed.

- **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 7). Floss as soon as your child has two teeth that touch, usually around ages 2-3 (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. **Note:** For children under 2, ask your child's doctor or dentist about fluoride toothpaste.

**Children 3 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 [eight 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. 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 and allow teeth to repair themselves. 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. Be a healthy example and follow a healthy dental care routine yourself, then they will too!

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

## **Eight 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.**
    - Let them choose their own toothbrush and toothpaste flavor.
    - Give them two choices such as "*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?*"
  5. **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.
  6. **Have a "play" toothbrush** they can use on their dolls or stuffed animals.
  7. **Make it a game.** Use a flashlight to check that you brushed all the "sugar bugs" away.
  8. **Pair it with a song or rhyme.** Search for a two minute toothbrushing song/rhyme.
- Here's one that is 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!*