



Don't Toss The Floss

Earlier this summer, oral hygiene found itself in the middle of a debate after news reports questioned whether flossing teeth was a waste of time. After reading a headline or hearing a sound bite on the radio, patients wondered whether this meant they could toss their floss, leading to dentists everywhere shaking their heads in exasperation. The reporters came to this conclusion because existing scientific research didn't support the oral health benefits of flossing. But the fact is, a lack of strong evidence does not equate to a lack of effectiveness, according to the American Dental Association (ADA), which represents 159,000 dentists from across the country and which has advocated for the public's health since 1859. Bottom line: Flossing is essential to helping you maintain healthy teeth and gums because it removes plaque that can lead to cavities or gum disease from the areas where a toothbrush can't reach. This is key in preventing cavities and/or gum disease.

The news stories also erroneously implied that the U.S. government had changed its stance on the importance of flossing because the 2015 U.S. Dietary Guidelines didn't include flossing. This could not be further from the truth, which is that the Dietary Guidelines Advisory Committee made a deliberate decision to focus on food and nutrient intake (i.e., added sugar) with its 2015 report. What's more, the U.S. Surgeon General, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), and other health agencies continue to promote their long-standing recommendation to clean between teeth daily. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) reaffirmed the importance of flossing in an August 4, 2016, statement to the ADA:

"Flossing is an important oral hygiene practice. Tooth decay and gum disease can develop when plaque is allowed to build up on teeth and along the gum line. Professional cleaning, tooth brushing, and cleaning between teeth [flossing and the use of other tools such as interdental brushes] have been shown to disrupt and remove plaque. At HHS, the National Institute of Health's National Institute of Dental and Craniofacial Research [NIDCR], CDC's Division of Oral Health, and Healthy People 2020 have additional information and resources about efforts to address and improve oral health."

For optimum oral health, you should floss once a day for two to three minutes, taking the time to floss between every tooth. Flossing properly can be tricky, however, so don't be afraid to ask your dentist or dental hygienist to demonstrate the correct technique for you to get the most benefit. You'll also want to be aware that timing is everything when it comes to flossing. According to the ADA, if you floss before you brush your teeth, the fluoride from the toothpaste has a better chance of reaching between the teeth.

When it comes to healthy teeth and gums, go to the best source for oral health information: your dentist and dental professionals like the ADA and the Massachusetts Dental Society.

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