

CORONAVIRUS

Why Dental Health During The Coronavirus Outbreak Matters, And How To Care For Your Mouth

Oral hygiene like brushing your teeth and flossing may feel basic, but it's a big window to your overall health.

By **Jill Di Donato**

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Nobody thinks of oral hygiene as luxe self-care. Brushing and flossing feels more like a chore, a habit you've adopted since the days of footsie pajamas. But since the mouth is a portal for taking in all kinds of things, including the coronavirus, oral care is essential right now.

Not only does good dental hygiene keep the bacteria in the mouth to a minimum, it can be, as The Mayo Clinic suggested, a window to your overall health. Oral conditions may impact infection in other parts of the body, especially in people with a compromised immune system.

To keep that microbiome in check, and keep you from an emergency dental visit during quarantine, HuffPost talked to three elite dentists who share advice for a five-star dental regimen.

Brush, floss, rinse, repeat.

Preventative measures like brushing and flossing are a must, as it might be a while until your next dental appointment. "No. 1 in improving oral hygiene is being sure we are brushing, rinsing and flossing twice a day," said Steven Davidowitz, a cosmetic dentist in New York. Staying hydrated throughout the day will also help remove plaque and bacteria.



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Brushing your teeth regularly will remove bacteria that can be harmful to your immune system.

“An electric or ultrasonic toothbrush is the best option for removing bacteria and keeping teeth and gums healthy,” said Bruce Lein, a dentist in Florida. And when it comes to toothpaste, natural isn’t always better. “Make sure your toothpaste contains fluoride to prevent cavities,” said Sam Saleh, a cosmetic dentist in Los Angeles and London. Charcoal paste might be trending, but you might end up with more “holes in your mouth,” according to Saleh.

Contrary to common belief, over-the-counter mouthwashes don’t contain a high enough concentration of alcohol to kill most bacteria and viruses.

“When a mouthwash bottle claims ‘kills 99.99% of bacteria,’ it is referring to the bacteria found around the gumline called tartar and plaque,” Davidowitz said. Instead, he recommends gargling with a hydrogen peroxide solution if you’re getting over a cold or flu. “Use a 3% concentration of hydrogen peroxide (the ones most commonly found in homes are 3%). Anything stronger is likely to cause irritation. Mix two parts water with one part hydrogen peroxide.” Limit this practice to a few times a week and only during times of minor irritation or recovering from strep, cold or flu. “Overuse can damage the normal flora and bio ecosystem of the mouth and allow the opportunity for fungal infections to appear,” he said.

Clean and replace your toothbrush often.

The bristles of your toothbrush can be a breeding ground for bacteria.

“Fungi, like candida, can live on a toothbrush,” Saleh said. “Because people are on high alert right now, a good tip is to rinse your brush with hydrogen peroxide every day to keep the bristles clean.”

If you’re using an electric toothbrush, your best bet is to store it in the charger, with the head cover on for added protection. And, you’ll want to keep your toothbrush in a clean area to dry, preferably away from your toilet, which can spray fecal matter when it’s flushed.

“A good toothbrush has flexible bristles and they should have rounded ends. Toothbrushes should be replaced when the bristles become bent or frayed,” Lein added. Don’t go longer than three months without changing the head or replacing your handheld brush.

Stop sharing oral hygiene products.

If you're sharing oral hygiene products with anyone in your family, stop immediately. Periodontal disease, a common septic condition caused by poor hygiene and candidiasis, an oral yeast infection also called thrush, can be spread easily via toothbrush. So can "viruses such as streptococcus mutans, which can cause MRSA infections as well as Herpes simplex and HPV, a virus linked to esophageal, oral and cervical cancers," Saleh said. Plus, "bleeding gums can spread a bloodborne illness."

To minimize the transference of germs, keep your own roll of floss and even your own tube of toothpaste. Because we're in the midst of a viral outbreak, to avoid cross contamination, anything you handle with your hands prior to putting in your mouth should not be shared.

Keep your aligners, mouth guards, or retainers bacteria free.

Clear aligners, mouth guards and retainers can collect bacteria and viruses. To clean them, "rinse them with cold or room temperature water (never hot! as the plastic may melt or deform) and dry them well before storing them in the holding case," Davidowitz said. Then apply OAP orthodontic appliance plastic cleaner or use mild antibacterial soap. Another option, Davidowitz explains, is to soak aligners in "one tablespoon of white vinegar and cold water for 15 minutes. Do not soak longer than 15 minutes, as this may damage your aligners."

Limit sweets and avoid biting into hard foods.

Sweets are acidic, which can, according to Saleh, make your mouth "more prone to cavities." This doesn't mean you have to swear off sugar during quarantine, but you should "limit sugary foods to one time per day and brush your teeth within one hour of consumption." Also avoid hard bread, popcorn, hard candy and anything that can crack the tooth, causing an emergency visit. And, Saleh warns, "Don't use your teeth as tools right now."

Don't pick chapped lips.

It might be tempting to pick at dry, chapped lips, but this, according to Davidowitz, may "irritate and infect oral areas." Stay hydrated, consider using a humidifier and moisturize lips with a gentle product. Resist licking, as this exacerbates dry skin.

Consider oil pulling.

Swish raw, organic coconut oil in your mouth for five to 10 minutes to help kill viruses in the mouth. Oil pulling can soothe sensitive gums, as coconut oil has anti-inflammatory and analgesic properties, according to a 2010 study.

Try tongue scraping.

You might find it satisfying to scrape away colonies of bacteria that live on your tongue. A 2004 study indicated that tongue scraping is more effective than tongue brushing for a squeaky clean mouth.

"Debris, bacteria and dead cells can build up on your tongue over time, can lead to bad breath and have a negative impact on your overall oral health," Lein said. "Using a tongue scraper can help remove this buildup and help with overall hygiene." So go ahead and balance the body's microbiome, boost immunity and have a little fun with this final step in your oral hygiene routine.

Here are a few product suggestions to get you started.

The Alkaline Oral Cleanse, \$19.99



ALKA WHITE

Balance the pH of your mouth to control bacteria.

Philips Sonicare DiamondClean Smart, \$299.95



PHILIPS

The Rolls Royce of oral care, this model is Dr. Saleh's pick.

Paavani Ayurveda Copper Tongue Cleaner, \$15



PAAVANI

Known for its antiseptic properties, copper helps keep the tongue germ-free.

Terra & Co. Brilliant Black Dental Floss, \$10



TERRA & CO.

Made with charcoal to fight bacteria, and coconut oil to enable thorough reach.

Indeed Hydraluron+ volumizing lip treatment, \$14.99



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Soothe chapped lips to prevent cuts and infection.