

Dental care myths and facts

Rumor does not equal fact in caring for your teeth

We've all heard old wives' tales or urban legends about how to care for our teeth. But with advances in dentistry in recent years, now is a perfect time to dispel some of those myths.

MYTH #1: I need a dental check-up every six months

Fact: The reality is that some people need to see the dentist less often than every six months and some actually need to be seen more frequently. You should consult with your dentist to personalize your care based on what makes the most sense for you.

MYTH #2: Polishing really cleans my teeth

Fact: Just to be clear here, there is a difference between cleaning and polishing teeth. Cleaning removes plaque, tartar and stains. Polishing smoothes the surface of the tooth.

Polishing used to be a standard part of a dental cleaning appointment. The dental profession used to think it was important to make teeth smooth. This was so plaque, the bacteria that causes cavities and gum disease, could not stick to the tooth as easily. We now know that bacteria are present on teeth within 30 minutes whether your teeth are polished.

We've learned that polishing removes the outer layer of tooth enamel. It's like sanding wood. It can take up to three months to rebuild the lost enamel. The outer enamel layer is where fluoride from toothpaste and mouth rinse is bonded onto the tooth. This fluoride-rich layer helps protect teeth from cavities and makes them less sensitive to cold, heat and touch. Polishing removes the fluoride-rich layer and actually harms the tooth.

MYTH #3: My child's first dental visit should be between the ages of 3-4 years.

Fact: Your child should visit the dentist for the first time after his or her first tooth comes in, usually between 6 and 12 months.

The most important reason to begin early is that dental problems can begin early. One big concern is Early Childhood Caries (formerly known as baby bottle tooth decay or nursing caries). Once a child's diet includes anything besides breast-fed milk, erupted teeth are at risk for decay. The earlier the dental visit, the better the chance of preventing dental problems.

MYTH #4: I need a hard-bristle brush to get my teeth clean.

Fact: You should actually use a soft-bristle brush for cleaning your teeth. Brush your teeth twice a day with an ADA-accepted fluoride toothpaste. Replace your toothbrush every three or four months or sooner if the bristles are frayed. A worn toothbrush won't do a good job of cleaning your teeth.

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MYTH #5: I should always brush my teeth after I eat.

Fact: Technically, from a health standpoint, it's better to brush your teeth before you eat, not after. The reason is that brushing removes plaque from your teeth. So if you remove plaque from your teeth before you eat, there's no plaque to cause bacteria to excrete acid and cause decay. But if you brush your teeth after, which many people do, that's mainly for cosmetic purposes. It will get rid of excess food, any smells, and staining, but from a health stand point, you should brush your teeth before you eat.

MYTH #6: Diet soda doesn't hurt my teeth like regular soda.

Fact: Sugar in soda combines with bacteria in your mouth to form acid. Diet or "sugar free" soda is just as harmful as regular soda because it contains its own acid, and acid in soft drinks is the primary cause of weakening tooth enamel.

So the next time you have a belief about how to care for your teeth that sounds a little fishy, talk with your dentist and ask for the facts. You'll have a bright smile and healthy teeth for years to come.

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