

All About Brushing and Flossing



Whiter teeth, fresher breath, fewer cavities. Who could ask for more from toothpaste? Some dental products make additional claims. Here's a short guide to ingredients and product claims to help you decide which toothpaste is best for your teeth. (Note: Choose products with the American Dental Association (ADA) Seal of Acceptance on the labels. For more information on the ADA Seal of Acceptance and brand name products that have this seal, access www.ada.org.)

Fluoride. To help prevent cavities, children and adults should use a toothpaste that contains fluoride. (Note: Many dentists prescribe fluoride supplements for people whose household drinking water contains little or no fluoride. If your drinking water is low in fluoride, you might want to ask your dentist about this option.)

Desensitizing toothpaste. Some toothpastes are specially formulated for people whose teeth are sensitive to touch or temperature changes.

Anti-plaque and tartar control toothpastes. Plaque is a sticky, bacterialaden goo that clings to the surface of your teeth. Unless plaque is removed every 24 to 36 hours, it can turn into a cement-like substance called tartar. And tartar destroys your gums. Plaque- and tartar-control formula toothpastes, used along with flossing and regular dental visits, can help to prevent plaque buildup. Mouthwash can help, too.

Whitening toothpastes. These remove stains on the surface of the teeth with gentle polishing, chemical agents, or other nonbleaching action. (Note: Consult your dentist before using over-the-counter peroxide-containing whiteners or bleaching agents.)

Don't Forget to Floss

Waxed. Unwaxed. Fine. Regular. Plain or fancy, all dental floss does the job: It removes bacteria and plaque from between your teeth and above and below the gum line areas your toothbrush can't reach. It also removes particles of food lodged between your teeth. Floss carefully at least once a day to help keep plaque from building up. (If plaque hardens into cement-like deposits called tartar, your teeth can start to decay or wobble due to loss of bone.) Here's how to floss.

1. Cut a piece of floss about one-and-a-half feet long. Wrap the ends of the floss about your middle fingers.
2. Hold the floss tightly between your thumb and index finger, exposing about one inch of floss. Gently guide the floss between your teeth, being careful not to snap it into the gums.
3. With the floss at the gum line, curve it into a C shape against one tooth and gently scrape the side of the tooth with the floss. Repeat on each of your teeth, top and bottom, using a fresh section of floss for each tooth.
4. After you've flossed, rinse your mouth with water or mouthwash to remove remaining debris. Your gums may be tender and bleed for the first week. That's normal. But if the bleeding continues, see your dentist.

Here are some additional hints.

- If you find flossing awkward and messy, try using a dental floss holder sold in drugstores. Instead of wrapping the floss around your fingers, you insert the floss in a small, plastic fork-like holder.
- To help you remember to floss daily, without fail, floss after you brush your teeth.