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Mouth Owner's Manual



Preventing
Tooth Decay
and Gum
Disease



Keeping Your Mouth Healthy

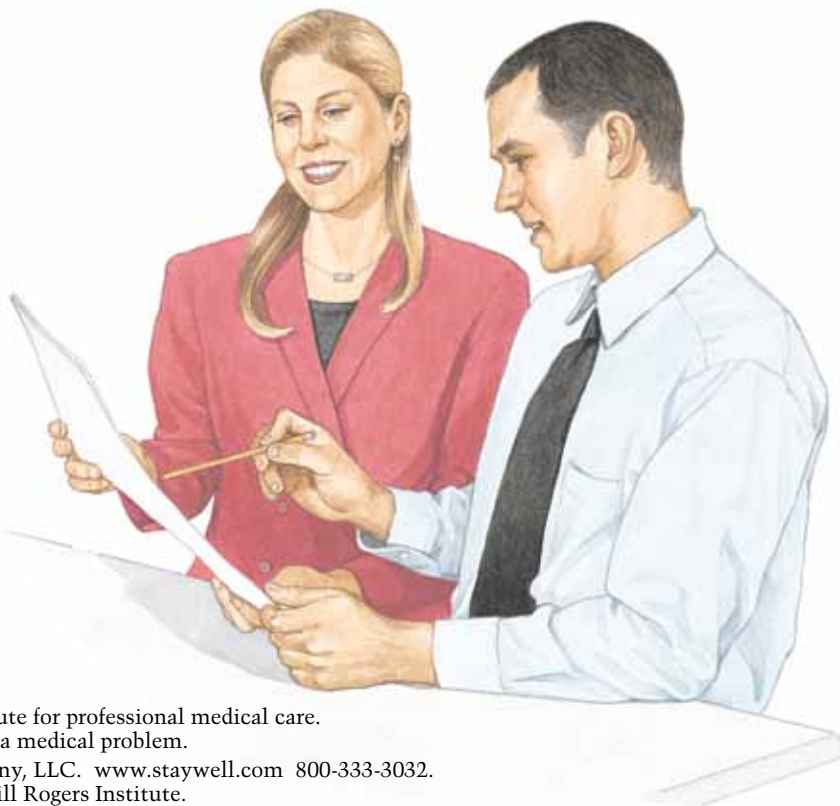
Have you ever thought about how much you use your mouth? Without it, you couldn't talk with your friends, enjoy your food, or even laugh at a joke. Do you care for your hardworking mouth as well as you should? If not, tooth decay and gum disease could be putting your smile in danger. Take control now to keep your mouth healthy. This booklet will help you learn how.

Benefits of a Healthy Mouth

Why bother caring for your teeth and gums? For one thing, what goes on in your mouth can affect the rest of your body. Poor oral health is linked to problems such as heart disease, stroke, and diabetes. But that's not all. If you're pregnant, caring for your teeth and gums can help ensure your baby is born on time and healthy. Good oral health can also:

- Keep you looking and feeling good. And when you feel good about your mouth, you're more likely to smile!
- Help you chew and digest your food.
- Keep your mouth comfortable and pain free.
- Help you speak clearly.
- Keep your breath fresh.

Taking care of your teeth and gums can help you feel confident about your smile.



This booklet is not intended as a substitute for professional medical care. Only your doctor can diagnose and treat a medical problem.

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Your dental team will help you keep your mouth in top form.

Your Dental Team

It's up to you to take care of your teeth and gums daily. Regular visits with your dental team help keep you on track. Members of this team may include:

- The **dentist**, who examines your mouth and diagnoses problems. The dentist will also suggest and perform treatment, if needed.
- The **dental hygienist**, who teaches you how to prevent problems with your teeth and gums. The dental hygienist also provides treatment and may do part of the exam.
- The **dental assistant**, who helps during the exam, treatment, and x-rays.
- **Office staff**, who schedule appointments and handle billing. They may also help with your insurance.
- **Specialist dentists**, who focus on certain types of dental work. You may be referred to them for certain treatments (if needed).

Your Oral Health

At dental visits, you will be asked about signs of problems. Before your visit, think about the answers to these questions:

- ☐ Are your teeth sensitive to heat or cold?
- ☐ Do your teeth hurt if you have sweet foods or drinks?
- ☐ Has the way you bite down changed?
- ☐ Do you feel pain when you bite down?
- ☐ Do any of your teeth feel loose?
- ☐ Do you have bad breath?
- ☐ Are your gums swollen, puffy, or sore?
- ☐ Do your gums bleed when you floss or brush?
- ☐ Has the color of your gums changed?
- ☐ Have your gums pulled back from your teeth?
- ☐ Are you happy with your smile?

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Your Mouth: The Inside Story

When you look at your mouth in the mirror, you can see hard white teeth surrounded by soft gums. What you likely can't see is a sticky coating of bacteria and other substances on your teeth and gums. This coating, called **plaque**, can harm your mouth if it's not kept under control.

Healthy Teeth and Gums

To have good oral health, you must have healthy teeth and gums.

- Teeth are made of hard tissue designed to break up food. Healthy teeth can be various shades of white (some staining on the teeth is normal). Teeth are set into the supporting bone of the jaw.
- Gums are soft tissues that cover bone and part of each tooth. The color of your gums depends on your ethnicity. But your gums should be the same color throughout your mouth.



Healthy teeth are made of the hardest tissue in the body. Healthy gums are firm, with well-defined, pointed tips between the teeth.

Enamel is a hard coating that protects the surface of the tooth.

Dentin is the middle layer of the tooth.

The **pulp** is the soft inner tissue of the tooth.

Ligaments are tiny fibers of connective tissue that attach the root to the bone.

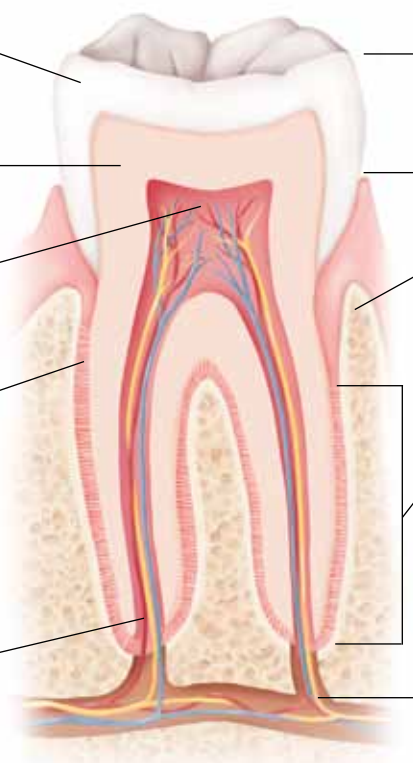
Blood vessels carry nutrients to the tooth.

The **crown** is the part of the tooth you can see. It has surfaces used for biting and chewing.

Bone in the jaw provides support and stability.

The **root** is the part of the tooth that is lodged in the supporting bone.

Nerves relay signals such as pain to and from the brain.



When Plaque and Tartar Form

Even in a healthy mouth, plaque forms. If not cleared away with daily brushing and flossing, this sticky film coats the teeth, gums, and tongue.

- As saliva and the tongue move in the mouth, some plaque is wiped off the tooth surfaces. But plaque can collect in the grooves of the teeth, between teeth, and at the gumline.
- Plaque bacteria feed on bits of sugary and starchy foods left in your mouth after you eat. This results in acid that can decay the teeth (see page 6).
- If not removed, plaque hardens into **tartar** (also called calculus). Tartar can spread below the gumline, where it damages the gums and bone (see page 7).



Plaque is a sticky film of bacteria on teeth.



Acid forms when the plaque bacteria feed on food particles. This is the main cause of tooth decay.



Tartar can form above and below the gumline if plaque is not removed. This can lead to gum disease.

Are You At Risk?

Some factors make you more likely to have problems with your teeth and gums. These include:

- Not taking good enough care of your teeth and gums.
- A low amount of saliva in the mouth, which allows plaque to collect.
- Smoking, which makes your body less able to fight infections such as gum disease. Smoking also reduces the amount of saliva in your mouth.
- Eating a lot of sugary and starchy foods, which causes more acid to form.
- Frequent snacking, which lets acid form more often.
- Crooked teeth, which can be harder to clean.

How Problems Develop

Plaque can cause two serious problems: tooth decay and gum disease. These problems damage the teeth and gums, and may even lead to tooth loss. When the mouth is well cared for, tooth decay and gum disease can be reversed in their early stages. Better yet, you can prevent these problems from starting by brushing and flossing daily.

Tooth Decay

Tooth decay happens when acid eats away at a tooth.

Cavities (also called caries) are holes that form in the teeth. They are most common in places that are hard to reach with a toothbrush. This includes the grooves at the tops of the teeth, and on the sides where the teeth touch. In late stages, tooth decay can be painful. It can also lead to tooth loss.



Tooth decay starts as acid slowly eats through the tooth's hard enamel. Brushing, flossing, and other dental care can keep tooth decay from progressing.



Once tooth decay eats through the enamel, it spreads quickly through the softer dentin. At this point, tooth decay must be treated by a dental provider.



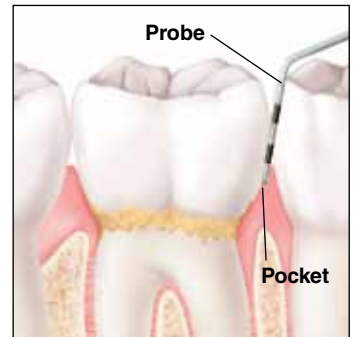
Because it affects hard-to-reach areas, you may not be able to see tooth decay in a mirror.

Gum Disease

Gum disease (also called periodontal disease) damages the tissues that support the teeth. There are often no symptoms until the late stages. Gum disease starts when tartar under the gumline infects the gums. Over time, the ligaments attaching the gums to the teeth break down. **Pockets** (spaces) form between the gums and the teeth where the gums are no longer attached. Your dentist or dental hygienist can detect these pockets using an instrument called a probe. If not treated, gum disease can destroy the bone that anchors the teeth.

Gingivitis

If not removed with brushing and flossing, plaque grows out of control. Tartar hardens along the gumline, attracting more plaque. Pockets form between the teeth and gums. Symptoms can include bad breath and sore, bleeding gums. Or, there may be no symptoms. Gingivitis can be reversed through dental cleanings, followed by regular brushing and flossing. If not treated, gingivitis can lead to periodontitis.



Periodontitis

Gum disease spreads to the bone supporting the teeth. The ligaments break down and the gums recede (shrink back). Pockets can deepen and fill with more bacteria. The gums can be bright red and can bleed easily. As the bone is destroyed, teeth can become loose.



Advanced Periodontitis

Pockets deepen even more and can fill with pus. There can be swelling around the roots of the teeth. The teeth can be sensitive to hot or cold, and can hurt when brushed. If not treated, bone loss keeps getting worse. Teeth may even fall out. Or, teeth may need to be removed to keep gum disease from spreading.

Your Dental Visit

You should visit the dental office at least every 6 months, or as often as directed. During your visit, your dental provider will make sure your teeth and gums are healthy. If problems are found, your dentist or dental hygienist will recommend self-care and treatment.

Your Health History

Since oral health is linked to general health, your visit will likely start with a health history. Tell your dental provider about any health problems you have or medications you take. This includes any over-the-counter medications, herbs, or supplements you use. You may also be asked about your daily tooth and gum care. Tell your dental provider if you grind your teeth or often breathe through your mouth. You should also bring up any oral health issues that concern you.

Your Dental Evaluation

Your dentist or dental hygienist may start by screening for oral cancers. This involves feeling your neck and throat and looking inside your mouth. Then your dental provider will:

- **Examine your teeth.** If you have any tooth decay, it will be marked on your dental record. Notes will be made about any restorations you have, such as fillings.
- **Examine your gums.** A probe is used to measure any pockets and gum recession. Your dentist or dental hygienist will also evaluate any bleeding that occurs. (Bleeding gums can be a sign of gum disease.)
- **Take x-rays and impressions** (pictures and molds of the teeth), if needed. These will be put in your record so your dentist or dental hygienist can refer to them at your next visit. This helps keep track of any changes to your mouth over time.



During your dental visit, talk to your dental provider about what he or she has found. This will help you know if your teeth or gums need better care.

Finishing Up

Depending on what your dental provider finds, the rest of your visit may include:

- **A cleaning**, to help prevent gum disease. Your dental provider will clean below the gumline, where your toothbrush and floss can't reach.
- **A cosmetic polishing**, to remove stains on the surfaces of your teeth (if needed).
- **Further evaluation and treatment** for any problems your dental provider finds (see page 14). You may be referred to a specialist.
- **Instruction** for giving your teeth and gums the best care at home.

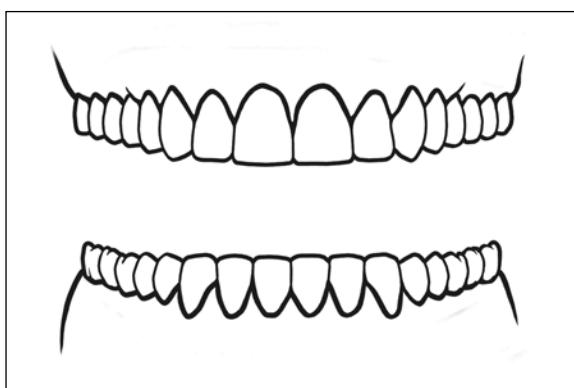
Your Tooth Chart

Your dentist or dental hygienist may use this chart to mark areas of your mouth that need extra care. If you have questions about how to care for a problem area, be sure to ask.

Upper teeth



Lower teeth



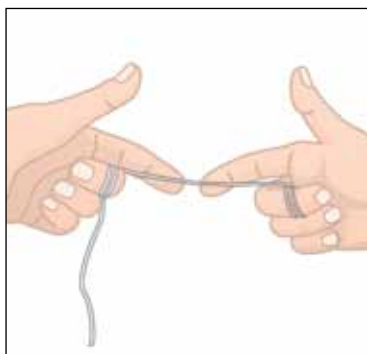
Front view of teeth

Caring for Your Teeth and Gums

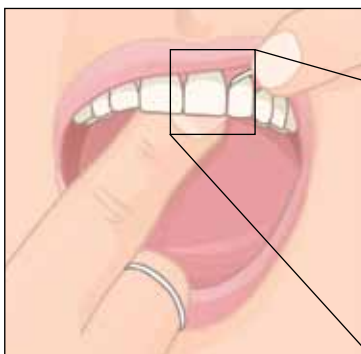
Regular flossing and brushing are the two best ways to care for your teeth. Flossing removes plaque from between your teeth and under your gumline (where a toothbrush can't reach). Brushing keeps bacteria from collecting on the surfaces of the teeth. Follow the tips below to floss and brush correctly.

Flossing

You should floss your teeth daily. Floss comes in many varieties, such as waxed, flat, or flavored. Find a type of floss you like to use. Then floss the sides of each tooth as shown below. Make sure to floss the back side of the last tooth on each side of your mouth.



Step 1: Wrap 18 inches of floss around your middle fingers. Secure it with your index fingers.



Step 2: Ease the floss between your teeth. Wrap it around one side of the tooth, forming a C-shape.



Step 3: Gently work the floss up and down, going below the gumline. Then, go back to step 2 and do the other side of the tooth.



NOTE: If you have a bridge or wear braces, use a floss threader to get the floss under the bridge or wires.

Aids You May Use



A floss holder may make flossing easier.

Brushing

Brush your teeth at least twice a day, when you wake up and before you go to sleep. It's best to brush after every meal. Brush for at least 2 to 3 minutes at a time. Use a toothbrush with soft bristles and a fluoride toothpaste with a taste you like. Brush your teeth as shown below.



Step 1: Hold the brush at a 45-degree angle at the gumline. Gently brush using a circular motion. Don't scrub or use a lot of pressure.



Step 2: Brush the inner surfaces of the back teeth at the same angle, using the same circular motion.



Step 3: Turn the brush and use the tip to clean the inner surfaces of the upper and lower front teeth.



Step 4: Clean the chewing surfaces using a scrubbing motion. Brush your tongue, then rinse well with water.



An **interdental brush** helps clean large spaces between teeth.



A **tongue cleaner** scrapes bacteria off your tongue.



A **powered toothbrush** can help you brush correctly.



A **mouth rinse** may help kill plaque bacteria.

In addition, an **end tuft toothbrush** helps you brush hard-to-reach spots. **Disclosing tablets** use a harmless dye to show areas of plaque you missed. And a **rubber tip stimulator** massages gums and firms up problem areas.

Other Things You Can Do

Daily care isn't the only way to keep your teeth and gums healthy. Good eating and drinking habits can also help. Along with flossing and brushing, try the tips below. If you have children, it's never too early to start teaching them good mouth care habits.

Eating Right

Sweets are not the only cause of tooth decay. Any carbohydrate (sugary or starchy food) can cause acid to form, leading to cavities. You don't have to stop eating these foods, but you can fight acid.

- Eat foods that help clear plaque from the teeth. These include carrots, celery, and apples.
- Snack less often. Most acid forms in the first 20 minutes after you eat. If you snack all day, acid constantly attacks your teeth. Try not to snack between meals. If you do eat sweets, it's best to have them with meals, not hours later. Avoid sipping on sugary drinks.

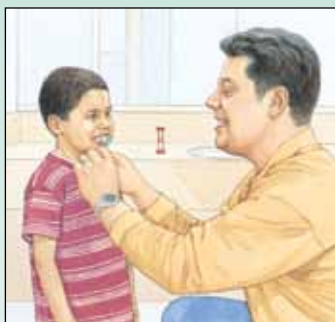


Choosing crunchy foods, like carrots and celery, helps clear plaque from the teeth. It's another great reason to eat your vegetables!

Teaching Your Children

Show your children how well you care for your mouth. This teaches good habits.

- Start brushing your child's teeth as soon as the first tooth erupts. Start flossing when the teeth start touching each other.
- Help your child until he or she has the motor skills to brush and floss well. (For many children, this is around age 8.)
- Use a timer to make sure your child's teeth are brushed for at least 2 to 3 minutes.
- Get aids to help make brushing fun for your child. Try pre-threaded floss holders, sparkly toothpaste, and toothbrushes with fun designs.



If You Have Dry Mouth

Having a dry mouth puts you at higher risk of tooth decay (see page 5). Dry mouth can be caused by certain medications. Or, it may occur if you often breathe through your mouth. If you have dry mouth:

- Take especially good care of your teeth and gums.
- Keep your mouth moist by drinking plenty of water. Chewing sugar-free gum can also help. In some cases, saliva substitutes can be used. Talk to your dentist or dental hygienist.

Ways Your Dental Provider Can Help

With your dental provider's help, you can prevent future damage to your teeth. Have your teeth cleaned every 6 months, or as often as scheduled. Also, ask your dentist or dental hygienist about the options below.

To Prevent Tooth Decay

Some options help keep acid from eating away the tooth's enamel.

- **Sealants** are made from a hard material that fills the grooves in the back teeth. By stopping plaque from building up in hard-to-reach places, they help prevent tooth decay. Sealants are often used on children's teeth, but they're useful for adults, too. Sealants can only be applied to teeth with no decay or fillings.
- **Fluoride treatments** make tooth enamel stronger. Fluoride may also stop decay in the enamel from eating through to the dentin. Most toothpastes contain fluoride. In many areas, fluoride is also added to drinking water. But if you need extra defense against tooth decay, fluoride may be applied directly to the teeth. Your dentist or dental hygienist may also recommend fluoride supplements you can use at home.



To Protect Your Teeth

Your dental provider may fit you with a device to protect your teeth from injury.

- A **night guard** (also called a bite guard) protects the teeth from bruxism (tooth grinding). The night guard serves as a barrier between the top and bottom teeth. This prevents the teeth from grinding against each other and causing damage. A night guard may be worn at night, or anytime you're likely to grind your teeth.
- A **sports guard** protects the teeth from contact that could damage them. It should be worn if you play sports, or during any activity that could result in injury to the teeth.



If You Need Treatment

Treatment helps keep tooth decay and gum disease from getting worse. Your dentist will suggest the best treatment for any problems found during your exam. Before treatment starts, your dental provider will make sure you're comfortable. If needed, your teeth and gums will be numbed to prevent pain. Below are some of the most common treatments.

Treating Gum Disease

Gum disease can't be cured. But treatment can help keep gum disease from getting worse. To help maintain a healthy mouth, you may need these treatments more than once. For more severe cases of gum disease, other treatments may be done as well.

Scaling and Root Planing

- **Why it's done.** To remove tartar and other bacteria from the roots of the teeth.
- **How it's done.** First, the teeth are cleaned (scaling). This removes plaque and tartar at and below the gumline. Then the root surfaces of the teeth are smoothed (root planing). This makes it harder for bacteria to attach to the roots. Ultrasonic instruments may be used during this procedure. These instruments use sound waves to remove deposits from teeth.



Scaling removes plaque and tartar from below the gumline.



Root planing evens out the root's surface, making it harder for bacteria to attach.

Antibiotic Treatment

- **Why it's done.** To reduce the bacteria in the mouth that lead to gum disease.
- **How it's done.** Antibiotics can be used in different ways. Antibiotic gels, chips, or powders may be applied directly to infected areas. Your dental provider may prescribe antibiotic mouthwash to be used just after you brush. Or, you may be prescribed pills that are taken orally.

Treating Tooth Decay

Tooth decay may be treated to keep it from moving farther into the tooth. If the tooth is severely damaged by decay, other treatments are available.

Filling Cavities

- **Why it's done.** To stop decay from continuing to damage the tooth.
- **How it's done.** First, any tooth decay is removed. This protects the tooth from further damage. Then, the cavity is filled with a hard material. This filling protects the damaged tooth and restores the tooth surface.



After tooth decay is removed, the hole is filled with a hard material.



Before you leave the dental office, schedule your next appointment.

Follow-up Visits

Visit your dental team at least every 6 months for a checkup and cleaning. If you're being treated for tooth decay or gum disease, you may need more frequent visits. These visits will likely decrease as your mouth care efforts start to pay off. Keep flossing, brushing, and using the other tips you learned in this booklet. Follow any special instructions your dentist or dental hygienist gives you. And enjoy flashing your healthy smile!

Make Your Smile Last a Lifetime

Tooth decay and gum disease can harm your mouth and affect how you feel about yourself. They may even lead to other health problems. It's up to you to protect your teeth and gums. By brushing, flossing, and having regular visits with your dental provider, you can help keep your mouth healthy. Now that's something to smile about!

To Learn More

Check out these resources for more tips on keeping your mouth healthy:

- **Academy of General Dentistry**
www.knowyourteeth.com
- **American Dental Association**
www.mouthhealthy.org
- **American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry**
www.aapd.org
- **American Academy of Periodontology**
www.perio.org



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