

Oral health mistakes you never knew you were making



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Taking care of our teeth and gums seems pretty straightforward. Brush your teeth twice per day and floss when you think of it. Be sure to see your dentist twice per year and you're golden. However, there is more to it.

There are some healthy practices you may be doing right now that are not so healthy for your teeth. From drinking fresh juice to brushing your teeth too often, you may be making some serious mistakes for your oral health.

Juicing



I have always assumed that those bloggers who share their fresh juice on Instagram every day are the picture of health. While that colorful drink may be doing wonders for their gut health, it's not doing their teeth any favors.

"Hot trends like juicing and the emphasis on eating a 'colorful' plate mean we're also eating heavily pigmented food, which can cause staining of the teeth. So when patients ask me about keeping their teeth healthy and how they can extend the effectiveness of things like whitening, bonding, and post-bleaching color, I recommend using a straw for heavily pigmented foods and liquids like coffee and juices," [Asia Richardson](#), general dentist and owner of five DentalWorks practices, told me. "You always want to minimize the amount of pigments you're exposing your teeth to, so when you do eat or drink those things that have the potential to stain your teeth, don't be afraid to use a straw when you can!"

If you're a water drinker like me, don't think you're off the hook. Lemon water can also harm your teeth. "Many people are drinking lemon water in the morning to help increase their metabolism, and unfortunately lemon water creates a very acidic environment in your mouth, which can cause enamel erosion," Cosmetic Dentist [Daniel Rubinshtein](#) told me.

Occasionally skipping brushing your teeth at night



We've all been there. You get home late from a night out with friends and have to get up early in the morning. You're exhausted and just fall into bed without brushing your teeth. If this routine starts becoming more common for you, your teeth will suffer.

"If you skip your nightly routine of brushing, flossing, and using mouthwash to keep your smile healthy, you will be creating a very bad habit. People find it easier to find the time in the morning to brush their teeth, because they are more likely to want to feel and look their best for the day ahead," Chief Dental Officer of DentalCorp Dr. [Gary Glassman](#) told me. "Most often people who find brushing their teeth before bed to be pointless just forget to do it. Skipping brushing your teeth before bed can have very bad consequences." According to Dr. Glassman, when you go to bed without brushing your teeth, your mouth will become more acidic, which leads to plaque and bacteria building up.

"If you forget to brush before bed once in awhile, this likely won't have a huge impact on your smile," explained Dr. Glassman. "The important thing is to not

make a habit of it. If you're going to bed a few nights a week without brushing, you're putting your beautiful smile at risk for enamel erosion, cavities, gum disease, and plaque buildup. A two-minute brush before bed can prevent this from happening!"

Not cleaning or replacing your toothbrush



I tend to replace my toothbrush every six months, because I always receive a new one when I go to the dentist for my teeth cleaning. However, even that is not often enough to keep my toothbrush clean.

"You should change your toothbrush every three months and any time you have been sick," Dr. Glassman told me. "If you have an electric or power toothbrush, you can use the ultraviolet system, which is good to do fresh out of package when replacing heads. You can also soak your toothbrush head for 20 minutes in mouthwash."

These are the safest ways to clean your toothbrush. Never put your toothbrush in the dishwasher or microwave to clean, because the plastic could melt.

Putting off your appointment



I get it. I really do. You're busy. In between work, family obligations, and the occasional night out with friends, you're stretched pretty thin, and going to the dentist can fall to the bottom of the priority list. However, putting off your appointment will only cause more issues down the road. "Don't skip your check-ups," Dr. Glassman told me. "It's all about *prevention prevention prevention* ."

If you choose to only visit the dentist when there is already an issue, it may be too late to treat it. "Going to see the dentist or dental hygienist when something hurts may be much more costly and possibly too late," Certified Dental Hygienist and educator [Jo-Anne Jones](#) told me. "Many disease processes in the mouth, including early decay, cancer, or pre-cancer and periodontal (gum) disease, are often silent until they are in the advanced stages. Your dental professional knows the early warning signs. Regular oral exams, both professionally and also performing a regular oral self-exam, provide you with the best possible outcome to maintain oral and overall health."

Brushing your teeth after drinking coffee



Most of us know that coffee isn't great for our teeth. I can't stand the stains that it leaves, but I can't quite quit it yet. I would assume that brushing the coffee off immediately would prevent those stains, but it will also damage your teeth.

"Most people think that you should brush their teeth right after drinking coffee to help fight staining and bad breath, but that actually is not correct," [Courtney Schiefelbein](#), a board certified orthodontist in New York City, told me. "Those beverages are so acidic that if you brush immediately after, you will cause more damage to your enamel because of the acid. Like they say, patience is a virtue. It's actually better to wait at least 30 minutes before you brush for the pH in your mouth to naturally neutralize. If you want a cleaner feeling right after you sip on your cup of joe, go for a rinse with water or a fluoride mouth rinse."

Drinking sports drinks



Athletes and gym-goers rely on sports drinks for a nice pick-me-up after working out, but they're not all good. Because these drinks can be so sugary, you might as well just pop a few candy bars after your barre class.

"People think sports drinks are healthy, as they have plenty of electrolytes for those with an active lifestyle. However, they can sometimes be worse than soft drinks," [Katie Polley](#), DMD of [Summerville Pediatric Dentistry & Orthodontics](#) told me. "They are filled with sugar, and since many people don't limit themselves on sports drinks like they do sodas, their sugar intake is increased, which causes cavities."

If you're used to relying on a sports drink after your workout, talk with your dentist or hygienist about better options.

Snacking throughout the day



I'm a grazer. I rarely eat one full meal, but rather prefer to lightly graze throughout the day. This keeps me feeling full and light while I'm working. However, my little habit is actually harming my teeth.

"Frequency of sugar consumption is more important than quantity," explained Dr. Polley. "It is more damaging to your teeth to snack on or sip sugary food and drink throughout the day versus having it all in one sitting. Your teeth will be constantly coated in a sugary film eating away at your teeth."

So if you're craving something sweet, it's better to sit down and enjoy that brownie to the fullest, instead of mindlessly grabbing little candies all day long.

Drinking wine



This one stings. While we don't always taste it, wine is actually full of sugar, which means it's putting you at an increased risk for cavities.

"Many people know not to eat foods that contain too much sugar in them like sweets, but most people do not pay attention to the amount of sugar in their beverages," Julia Faigel, DDS of [Dr. Dental](#) told me. "There is a lot of hidden sugar in your drink that you may not notice. For example, one glass of Chardonnay contains about 1.4 grams of sugar. All this sugar can stick to your teeth when you take a drink."

Sharing toothbrushes



Be honest — you've shared a toothbrush before. Maybe you were staying at your sister's house and forgot yours, or perhaps you met someone special and had an unexpected sleepover. Either way, I'm betting you've tried someone else's toothbrush before. In addition to the yuck factor, sharing toothbrushes puts you at risk for infection.

"Your mouth is the gateway to your health," [Dr. Sanda Moldovan](#), a certified nutritionist and periodontist, told me. "Unfortunately, when you share a toothbrush, you are opening that gateway to a lot of problems you'd be better off avoiding."

There are a number of reasons why sharing your toothbrush is dangerous to your health. "When some people brush, their gums bleed," Dr. Moldovan said. "That can result in exposure to bacteria and viruses that can enter the bloodstream." Our toothbrushes can also hang onto bacteria, food particles, viruses, and fungi. "One of the most common oral infections, periodontitis, can be spread via the toothbrush. There are a lot of implications to that, such as the potential loss of teeth," explained Dr. Moldovan. "In this case, it's also not just a problem that's limited to the mouth. Periodontal disease can affect the whole body."

Brushing too hard



Has your toothbrush ever snapped in half during brushing? Mine has, and that was my first clue that I brush way too hard. "Brushing too hard or too aggressively is a common oral health mistake that many of my patients make," Regional Dental Director for [Jefferson Dental Clinics](#) Leslie Renee Townsend, DDS told me. "In fact, patients who use electric or spinning-head brushes tend to overuse these devices and can damage their tooth enamel and gum tissue."

Not sure if you're being too aggressive in your brushing habits? "Tell-tale signs that a patient has been brushing too forcefully include receding gums, teeth sensitivity, irritation of the gum line, and thin or worn enamel," explained Dr. Townsend. "You may notice that your toothbrush looks frayed or the bristles look bent; these are signs that you might be brushing too hard."

To fix this problem, simply use less pressure when brushing. "Ease off of your toothbrush. Time and consistency are more important to get a good clean than vigorous motions," said Dr. Townsend. "Keep in mind that daily brushing is important, but professional dental cleanings are the best way to remove built up plaque and tartar."

Brushing immediately after eating



If you are in the habit of grabbing your toothbrush the moment you are done eating, it's time to slow down. Just like with drinking coffee, take some time to rest and chat at the dinner table before brushing your teeth.

"Although we feel brushing immediately after eating provides us with the best possible defense against cavities, it may be doing irreversible harm," explained Jones. "Many of the foods and beverages we consume today have a low pH, creating a very acidic environment in the mouth. If we are using a harder toothbrush or an aggressive or scrubbing brushing method, we can remove tooth structure. An acidic environment bathes the teeth in acid, making it very soluble and vulnerable to erosion. It is best to wait 30 to 60 minutes before brushing after consuming any foods or beverages to allow the mouth to return to a neutral pH environment."

Trying over-the-counter whitening products



We all want whiter teeth, but having them professionally whitened at the dentist tends to feel like overkill. There are so many options on the pharmacy shelves, so it seems like the logical move to start there. However, these over-the-counter whitening kits could be harming your teeth.

"Buyer beware! Whitening products sold outside of the dental professional environment are not regulated. Many are ineffective or injurious to the tooth structure," warned Jones. "Overuse can create sensitivity and permanent tooth structure modification. It is always best to obtain an oral assessment prior to commencing any whitening treatment. There are many professional whitening options available to meet consumer needs today from a simple whitening 'pen' to an in-office light-activated system." When it comes to whitening, leave it to the professionals.

Skipping flossing



I never used to be a flosser. It always seemed like such an unnecessary step and I usually forgot. However, being shamed by the dentist worked, and now I can't go back to my pre-flossing days. "Not removing debris that lingers in between your teeth can wreak havoc on plaque build-up," explained Dr. Glassman. "Removing this sticky buildup daily helps to prevent cavities and gum disease. Plaque contains bacteria that feeds off of the food left in between your teeth in those hard to reach places your toothbrush can't reach."

Jones echoed Dr. Glassman. "Floss or die may sound a little over dramatic, but bacterial build-up in between the teeth can lead to chronic inflammation throughout the entire body," she said. "Chronic inflammation is one of the hottest topics of medical research today, as it is the one commonality between so many of our systemic illnesses, such as diabetes, cardiovascular disease, and Alzheimer's. Daily removal of bacteria and food build up between the teeth is a critical component to oral and overall health."

One excuse for not flossing is because it could cause bleeding of the gums, but that just shows how much you need it. "Well, they probably bleed because you don't floss," [Premier Dental](#) Director of Clinical Affairs [Dr. Jason H Goodchild](#)

told me. "If you practice good hygiene, including good interdental care, then the bleeding will stop."

Ignoring crowded or crooked teeth



Having crowded or crooked teeth may seem like a simple cosmetic problem, but they can actually cause serious health concerns. "Patients do not realize that crowded or 'crooked' teeth contribute to so many dental issues, including gum disease, cavities, abnormal tooth wear, and fracturing of teeth, not to mention TMJ problems too," Dr. Cindy Brayer of [Creating Smiles Dental](#) told me. "Many patients think that crowded teeth only look unattractive, and they say that they do not care about their looks. We hear that a lot, and we have to spend a lot of time to convince them that it affects their overall oral health. Not to mention they will lose their teeth sooner if the teeth are not straight."

You also probably fixate on your crooked smile in every picture you take, so do yourself a favor and talk with your doctor about how to correct them. The fix may be easier than you thought.

Avoiding cleaning areas with bleeding gums



In general, bleeding from any part of your body is a bad sign. However, when it comes from your mouth, it's an indicator that it's time to make changes. Many people avoid the areas of their mouth where they bleed, but they should actually do the opposite.

"Patients think that if their gums bleed when they brush or floss, then do not touch the area, which is completely wrong," explained Dr. Brayer. "The longer you leave it alone, the worse it will get! They need to see a dentist to find out why they are having the bleeding gums."

Bleeding gums means there is inflammation in your body. "Bleeding in the gums following brushing or flossing is a strong indicator of inflammation and periodontal disease. It is not the toothbrush or the floss that is creating this response. It is the increased blood flow to the area that is reflective of the inflammatory response," Jones told me. "This is often painless so can be easily ignored. Ignoring this critical symptom can put not only your oral health at jeopardy, but also your overall health. The mouth is the portal of entry to the body for bacteria and toxins, and just as the eyes are the mirror to the soul, the

mouth is the mirror to the body. Keep your mouth healthy and provide your body with the best possible chance to sustain lifelong health."

Assuming no pain means no problems



One reason why so many people put off going to the dentist is because they feel fine. However, dental problems can start with no symptoms whatsoever, so having no pain does not mean you are healthy.

"Patients believe if nothing hurts, then nothing is wrong. This is incorrect and leads to bigger problems down the road," Cosmetic Dentist [Anna Berik](#) told me. "Tooth decay doesn't hurt until the nerve of the tooth is involved, so waiting to see the dentist until you have pain will most likely require a dental procedure."

Waiting until you have pain to see the dentist is also going to be more expensive for you. "This is a dangerous strategy for patients, because cavities and gum disease should not hurt," explained Dr. Goodchild. "By the time the patient feels pain or discomfort, the problems are likely more severe and definitely more costly."

Brushing more than twice daily



Okay overachievers, it's time to step away from the toothbrush. Brushing twice per day and flossing daily is perfect, and there is no need to go above and beyond. "Over brushing and flossing (more than two times a day) can cause damage to the enamel and gums," explained Dr. Rubinshtein. "It is not about the amount of times you brush and floss, but the quality of how you brush and floss." So stop packing your toothbrush in your work bag and go back to being a normal person.