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What is 'mask mouth' and how can you avoid it?

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Wearing a facemask is essential to stopping the spread of COVID-19, but dentists have noticed a slightly unpleasant side effect. PHOTO BY GETTY IMAGES

Wearing a face mask has proven to be one of the most effective ways people can protect themselves and others against COVID-19.

However, the widespread adoption of that practice has led to a growing number of patients showing up at dental offices complaining about bad breath and occasional mouth sores.

It's a new oral hygiene issue dentists have dubbed "mask mouth."

There's a simple reason why this happens, says Dr. Gary Glassman, a Toronto-based dentist and Chief Dental Officer of dentalcorp, a nationwide network of dental clinics.

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Why does that matter?

“Saliva acts as a natural irrigation system in your mouth, so when it dries up, food particles don't get flushed away. Instead, they stick to the teeth, creating a breeding ground for bacteria to flourish,” Glassman explains.

“This can lead to all sorts of health issues, especially if you're not practicing good oral hygiene. What might start as bad breath could eventually turn into tooth decay or gum disease – or worse. It's essential to take better care of your teeth and gums, because oral health and general health are really one and the same at the end of the day.”

People can do a few things to avoid the dry mouth that comes with mask-wearing, he says. One is drinking lots of water or using sugar-free gum to stimulate the production of saliva.

“Even something as simple as reducing alcohol and caffeine consumption can help,” Glassman says.

The real problem, he explains, is not the masks. It’s that people aren’t paying as much attention to their oral health during the lockdown.



When dental practices were shut down for three months, many people missed out on their regular cleanings and checkups. Even though dental offices reopened, many patients still have not returned.

“Because of that, we’re noticing more incidences of bad breath, mouth sores, cavities and receding gums,” Glassman says. “In some cases, that wouldn’t have

happened if they had just paid more attention to their day-to-day oral hygiene routines. Oral health is just as important as exercising to stay fit, because it helps keep up your defences against bacteria.”

The basics are easy to maintain if you put your mind to it, he says.

“You’d be surprised at how many people aren’t flossing and brushing regularly. Some barely manage to brush their teeth once a day.”



PHOTO BY GETTY IMAGES

At a minimum, you should be brushing twice a day and flossing once a day. Other helpful tools include gum massagers (to stimulate circulation), water flossers (for removing particles between teeth and at the gumline) and tongue scrapers (to remove bacteria).

Rinsing with warm salt water or alcohol-free mouthwashes can also play a part in preventing plaque buildup.

“All of these practices are especially important when we’re wearing masks every day,” Glassman says. “Maintaining a clean oral cavity can prevent issues like mask mouth from happening.”

Proper mask-wearing and care are also essential, starting with the right fit.

“There are so many kinds of masks, so it should be easy to find one that fits properly over your nose, mouth and chin,” he adds.

Masks should also be cleaned and changed often.

“If you wear one too long without washing it, they can get to be hotbeds for bacteria growth.”

Glassman advises carrying more than one mask with you, so you can make a quick change if the one you’re wearing gets dirty or wet.

“That’s especially important when visiting a dentist’s office. Make sure you put on a fresh mask when the appointment is completed. It’s important to keep your hands away from your face to prevent inoculating yourself with viruses or bacteria.”

Also, keep your hands away from your mask, he says. “I’ve seen people constantly touching and adjusting them. That’s not good.”

Glassman says we all know that mask-wearing will be part of our lives for many months to come, and “that’s all the more reason for you to keep yourself as healthy as possible, including your oral health.”

While people might try to hide their mask mouth symptoms with breath mints or mouthwash, you could choose instead to book a dental care appointment or a teledentistry appointment for treatment or some oral health advice.

If you’re looking to book an in-person or virtual dental care appointment and you don’t have a regular dentist, visit to find a dentist in your area.

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