

Is Flossing really necessary?

The short answer is yes. Flossing removes plaque and debris that stick to teeth and gums between your teeth. Plaque is a soft, sticky accumulation that occurs on teeth and gum tissue. It is the host to a complex system of microorganisms including bacteria which cause inflammatory diseases of the gingiva called gingivitis and periodontitis or gum disease. Plaque formation can be divided into various stages. The first stage is the formation of the acquired or salivary pellicle. It is an amorphous, tenacious, membranous film, about 1-2 microns thick, that forms on teeth and other solid surfaces in the mouth such as restorations, calculus, orthodontic appliances, dentures, etc. It is easily removed by brushing but begins reforming in minutes and completely reforms very quickly. Bacteria are not required for pellicle formation, but they adhere to and colonize it shortly after the pellicle is formed. A group of protein molecules called adhesions located on the bacterial cell surfaces recognize and link to the pellicle glycoproteins promoting attachment of specific bacteria with the initial colonization of the pellicle and with the adhesion of bacteria, bacterial plaque is then formed. If plaque is left on the teeth it increases in mass and thickness and the number and types of bacteria increase. Gingivitis is a result of increased plaque and results in swollen and red gums that bleed easily. If plaque continues to accumulate mineral salts are deposited into the plaque and calculus is formed. With the formation of calculus, periodontitis or gum disease can take hold. Calculus cannot be removed by brushing or flossing requiring a visit to the dentist to be removed. However, bacterial plaque, once disturbed by flossing and brushing, takes approximately twenty four hours to reform. This is the reason we need to floss daily so that we can disrupt the salivary pellicle and prevent bacterial plaque from forming and accumulating between our teeth where our toothbrush cannot reach.

If you haven't flossed in a while, you may see bleeding and blood on the floss after you use it. This indicates that your gums are inflamed and in need of flossing to remove bacteria. With a regular regimen of flossing the bleeding should go away.

One method of flossing is the spool method and the loop method. The spool method is suited for those with manual dexterity. Take an 18-inch piece of floss and wind the bulk of the floss lightly around the middle finger. (Don't cut off your finger's circulation!) Wind the rest of the floss similarly around the same finger of the opposite hand. This finger takes up the floss as it becomes soiled or frayed. Maneuver the floss between teeth with your index fingers and thumbs. Don't pull it down hard against your gums or you will hurt them. Don't rub it side to side as if you're shining shoes. Bring the floss up and down several times, forming a "C" shape around the tooth and being sure to go below the gumline and floss each side of the tooth.

Another form of flossing involves using flossers or interdental floss ups. These are disposable pieces of plastics which have a piece of floss attached. They allow for one handed flossing and are excellent for children and for those who have a hard time flossing with regular floss. Just maneuver the flosser between your teeth and bring the floss up and down and be sure to floss each side of the tooth.

Dental floss comes in many forms: waxed and unwaxed, flavored and unflavored, wide and regular. They all clean and remove plaque about the same. Waxed floss might be easier to slide between tight teeth or tight restorations. However, the unwaxed floss makes a squeaking sound to let you know your teeth are clean. However don't use waterpicks as a substitute for brushing and flossing. They are effective around orthodontic braces, which retain food in areas where a toothbrush cannot reach but they do not remove plaque.

By brushing and flossing we help to eliminate the bacteria which can lead to bad breath, gingivitis, and periodontal disease thus creating smiles which last a lifetime.

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