

Oral Health - more important than you think

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August is National Oral Hygiene Month and statistically speaking South Africa has an above average incidence of poor oral hygiene.

This is largely due to the fact that 80% of the country's Oral Health practitioners practice in the private sector - thus leaving the remaining 20% of the oral health workforce to 80% of the population. Issues of budgetary constraints, under-developed infrastructures and lack of appropriate manpower therefore prevent sufficient public oral health service delivery.

Other extenuating circumstances are poor dietary habits and poverty related issues such as limited access to clean water; all of which culminate in our teeth being at higher risk of being affected by cavities. Remember too that not only do poorly looked after teeth affect one's appearance, but bad dental health also has proven links to bad general health and other medical conditions.

Plaque is not only the most common dental problem but also the easiest to develop as it builds up on our teeth on a daily basis causing cavities as well as gum disease. Poor oral hygiene allows for acid-producing bacteria to build up on the teeth which demineralises the enamel and causes decay. Bad breath (also known as halitosis) is often a direct result of poor oral hygiene.

It is recommended to visit a dentist or oral hygienist once every six months or no less than once a year for a professional clean and check up. Your dentist can also help you work out an oral health plan or routine that is specific to your needs. In order to maintain good oral health there are four basic steps to follow on a daily basis:

Brushing teeth: It is important to brush no less than twice daily, especially before going to bed. Brushing removes the dental plaque bacteria that promotes tooth decay and can cause gum disease. The type of toothpaste used is also important; there are many options available depending on what your requirements are and your dentist is the best person to advise on this. It is however important to use a fluoride toothpaste - most currently on offer are fluoride based.

The toothbrush you use is also instrumental in maintaining a clean mouth; here are some helpful tips when choosing which to purchase:

Buy a toothbrush with Nylon bristles (Natural bristles wear out easily and allow bacteria to grow);

The head size should fit comfortably in your mouth;

Your dentist will advise you as to which bristle hardness is best for you;

Change your toothbrush every 3 - 4 months (more frequently for children as they wear out easier), or immediately should the bristles start to lose their natural shape and also after a cold or flu;

Store your toothbrush in an upright position and uncovered to allow it to dry properly, and

Never share your toothbrush with anyone as it can increase the risk of transmitting infections.

Tongue cleaning: A lot of people probably don't clean their tongue simply because they don't know that they should. The debris of daily activities such as eating and drinking build up on the tongue and this can lead to a large variety of bacteria, oral fungi, decaying food particles as well as dead cells collecting on the tongue. This combination can cause bad breath (halitosis) and may even affect the health of the teeth and gums which in turn leads to tooth decay as well as potentially causing gingivitis and periodontitis. The tongue is rich in bacteria and, being moist and not often exposed to light, is an ideal spot for bacteria to spread.

Flossing: Cleaning between the teeth with dental floss is of utmost importance as it helps to remove plaque as well as

decaying food remains that are stuck between the teeth. Trapped food particles and plaque left in the mouth will only irritate the gums and allow the gum tissue to bleed more easily. Flossing also helps to fight gum disease and prevents cavities between the teeth, as well as preventing receding gums which can become very painful if left untreated.

Flossing is recommended at least once a day, before bedtime or after meals. There are various flossing products available such as tape and waxed floss for people with small spaces between their teeth. It is normal for gums to bleed when flossing and this should not deter you from flossing, it is in fact a sign that you need to improve your oral health and the bleeding will lessen with time and regular flossing as the gums become stronger.

Oral Irrigation: Oral irrigation rids the mouth of all the left over bacteria, food particles, etc that brushing and flossing are not able to reach. One method of irrigation is to rinse your mouth out with mouthwash after brushing. Saliva also irrigates the mouth and teeth and there are certain foods that promote saliva production. There are also sugar-free chewing gums available that promote saliva which in turn helps to clean the teeth. Chewing gum after a meal helps to loosen sticky food particles left on the teeth after eating.

Food intake is a major player in tooth decay. Foods that contain fluoride and calcium such as milk and cheese are great for the teeth; the enamel is made of calcium and the additional calcium in milk and cheese aid the calcium build-up. It is also important to try to keep the pH balance of the mouth neutral as demineralisation occurs when the pH level is down. Sugary or acidic foods and beverages lower the pH of the mouth. Food rich in vitamin B such as cereals and bread as well as vitamin C enriched foods like fresh fruit and vegetables contribute to healthy gum tissue. Lean meat, fish and poultry provide magnesium and zinc for teeth. Acidic fruits such as oranges, lemons, limes and apples lower the pH balance of the mouth so it helps to drink water after consuming these products to rinse the excess acid from the mouth

It is advisable for mothers to encourage and develop healthy oral hygiene habits in children from a very young age and is also important for pregnant women to ensure they are eating all the right foods and taking the right supplements to assist their unborn child's teeth to mineralise (calcification). This starts happening from the 3rd to 4th month of pregnancy.

Visit your nearest Clicks Pharmacy for advice on oral hygiene. Clicks also offers a wide range of oral health products for adults and children.

Go to www.clicks.co.za to locate your nearest store.

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