

How To Adultify Your Oral Care Routine

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A guide to taking care of those pearly whites like a real grown-up

BY JENNA IGNERI · MAY 23, 2017

Growing up, I went to the dentist—who just happened to be my uncle—quite often. Never wanting to disappoint my dear Uncle Dave with a cavity at my scheduled semiannual cleaning, I brushed and flossed multiple times a day (probably too much, actually) and threw all kinds of mouthwash into the mix. I almost enjoyed it.

That is until I moved out of my parent’s house and went on to college. Sometime during that partially messy and confusing time of my life, before I hit actual adulthood, I stopped caring. I moved to New York City for school and deemed it far enough away for me to not get my regular cleanings from my uncle in central New Jersey. For a few years, I never bothered going to a dentist in my new city, and exploring New York meant drinking a lot of barely-legal strawberry daiquiris and understandably passing out at home sans brushing.

After graduating college and attempting to be more adult-like in every aspect of my life, and being excited over having my own health insurance thanks to my first big girl job, I finally went for a cleaning (which later resulted in a cavity filling and getting my wisdom teeth yanked out of my face). I still struggle with being good to my mouth from time to time, and I know many of you out there were, or still are, just like me, passing out to Netflix on the couch, bag of chips in hand—and not a toothbrush in sight.

As many of us probably need a little guidance in the oral care department (about 50 percent, actually, as you’ll read later), I chatted with oral health experts to get the lowdown on how to adultify our oral health routine.

Below, read on to learn how to be the responsible adult with shiny, clean teeth you’ve always dreamed of being.



KNOW THE BASICS

Know the basics

Oral health 101: While we're sure you learned the following in early childhood, a little refresher course never hurts, right?

In general, all the dentists and oral health experts we spoke with agree that a healthy mouth requires brushing a minimum of twice a day, with each brushing session taking about two minutes. "Brushing first thing in the morning and last thing before bed is ideal, with the exception of those who have braces and may need to brush a bit more. Do note: There is such a thing of brushing too many times a day," says Simon Enever, co-founder of quip, the oral care subscription service. "When brushing, you should focus on brushing one tooth at a time individually, so that the time added up per tooth should take about two minutes."

When it comes to flossing, Dr. Jennifer Plotnick of Grand Street Dental recommends flossing once a day, before you brush. "I usually recommend that my patients floss prior to brushing so that any food and tartar are removed effectively, which allows the toothpaste to penetrate all areas of the teeth," she says. "Plus, it's usually the part that most people get lazy about, so taking care of it from the get-go will encourage more people to do it."

Dr. Marc Lazare, doctor of dental surgery and author of **Dr. Lazare's: The Patient's Guide to Dentistry**, stresses that the most important time of day to brush your teeth is before you go to bed. "When you're awake, your saliva helps to bathe and rinse your teeth, but you salivate less when you're asleep, making your teeth more susceptible to developing cavities from the debris left on them."

While twice a day is standard for most with a healthy mouth, **Lazare** also recommends brushing after meals and snacks if you have the chance, and especially after taking any liquid or chewable medicines. "The sugars and acids contained in medicines can actually break down the tooth's enamel," he says.

While this information may seem redundant to some, a lot of people don't actually follow these guidelines at all. In fact, Enever points out that, according to studies, only about 50 percent of people brush their teeth the recommended twice a day and the average brushing time is closer to one minute than the recommended two. If you're one of these people, you're certainly not alone, but it's time to take control and change bad habits.

STEP UP YOUR BRUSHING GAME

Step up your brushing game

So, now you know all the basics. Why not step it up?

Both Plotnick and Enever stand by the fact that how the teeth are brushed is way more important, and much more effective, than the type of brush being used. "The key to effective brushing is the technique, routine, and upkeep of the person using the brush, not whether you use a manual or electric brush, nor what power setting it's on," says Enever.

However, electric toothbrushes do have specific benefits that manual brushes do not, and when used with an effective routine, you make your oral care routine that much easier, healthier, and less daunting. Timers are one of the features that make all the difference, as they help ensure you brush for a full two minutes. (Quip and Philips are just two of the brands whose brushes are equipped with such timers.) Quip's subscription model, which sends new heads and toothpaste every three months, also ensures the user isn't employing an old brush with ineffective bristles.

Lazare speaks highly of powered toothbrushes, as they generate more brush strokes per second, which is not only more effective but helps improve the user's technique. "There's usually less trauma to the gums and teeth when brushing with a power toothbrush since many overzealous manual toothbrush users bang into their gums with the wrong technique or scrub too hard," he says. He recommends the

Philips Sonicare Diamond Clean, as not only does it remove 10 times more plaque than a manual toothbrush, but it also has a pressure sensor that gently vibrates the handle when the user brushes too hard, alerting them to be a little less rough. We personally also love its rose gold color, charging case, and five different modes whether you want to focus on cleaning your gums or a deep cleaning.

KNOW YOUR TOOTHPASTE

Know your toothpaste

While Plotnick says she isn't very particular about toothpaste, she recommends certain types for specific patients. For example, she'll suggest a sensitive formula—which is gentler on enamel—to a patient with sensitive teeth, recommending they stay away from anything with tartar control or whitening features, as they tend to be more abrasive on the teeth.

Natural toothpastes are also growing increasingly popular, as the natural beauty and wellness industries continue to boom. However, just like anything you put on your skin, in your hair, or ingest, you should know what's in your toothpaste. Evener warns that you should proceed with caution and check in with your dentist when it comes to natural toothpaste. "While some can be great, others are using the word 'natural' very loosely," he says, "Others are jumping on the bandwagon with buzzy ingredients, but without explaining how to use them properly, how often to use them, or sometimes even mentioning what they actually do. The ADA and most dentists still recommend 'regular' fluoride anticavity toothpaste due to its tooth strengthening properties."

MOUTHWASH? YAY OR NAY?

What's the deal with mouthwash?

The opinions on the necessity of mouthwash vary amongst dentists. **Lazare** recommends using antiseptic rinses pre- or post-brushing for their ability to kill germs in between your teeth but making sure the formulas are alcohol-free, as alcohol can have a drying effect on the mouth.

Plotnick, on the other hand, is not a huge fan. “Many of the over-the-counter products out there have alcohol in them and a host of other chlorides and additives, which I don’t think healthy patients need,” she says. “Not many people know this, but many commercially available mouthwashes can cause staining of teeth.” Eek. While she agrees with **Lazare** that there are definitely benefits to mouthwashes, especially for those with periodontal issues and healing tissues, she prefers her patients to try a more natural approach.

“If your gums are irritated, try warm salt water rinses. If you want to get into a great routine of keeping your gums really healthy and evening brightening your teeth naturally, try oil pulling every morning.”

WATCH YOUR DIET

Pay attention to what you eat

Being aware of what you eat is a big part of stepping up your oral health. **Lazare** points out that while it may be a given that chewy candy such as taffy, caramel, and jelly beans are some of the biggest cavity culprits, as they get trapped within the pits and grooves of your teeth, you'd be surprised to know which other foods can cause potential oral damage: nuts, raisins, and dried fruit and, essentially, anything that doesn't dissolve quickly.

"Any food debris left on the tooth creates an acid attack in the mouth to break it down," he says. "The less likely the food is to dissolve or rinse away, the longer the acid attacks will be. Chocolate, which is full of sugar, is actually not as bad for your teeth as dried fruit and nuts because it dissolves quickly." Well, that's all we needed to hear. *Unwraps candy bar*

MAKE IT A PRIORITY

Make it a priority

According to Plotnick, the biggest mistake young adults are making when it comes to dental health is that they're not prioritizing it. "Many who are uninsured will decide to simply not go to the dentist at all, or until something hurts," she says. "I try to educate my patients on the actual cost of treatments, and they're pretty surprised to learn that they spend more on coffee per year than they would on getting preventative basics." Sound familiar? This is a habit that she warns against. "Dental mistakes you make when you're young will always come around to haunt you when you're older. If you have a lot of dental work now, you're going to have a lot of dental work to replace later."

So, as a young adult, make taking care of your teeth and gums a priority. While, of course, you should make sure your daily routine is up to par, Plotnick also recommends taking care of any issues you have before they become bigger problems, such as fillings when they're small or correct grinding issues before you actually hurt your bite.

So what does this all come down to? As someone trying to get this adult life right, you should finally stop putting off that dentist appointment. We know, we know—adulting results in being really busy, but that doesn't mean you should let your teeth suffer, especially later on in life. According to Lazare, the average person with healthy teeth and gums should go see their dentist for a cleaning every six months—and, of course, even more often if you have gum problems or other issues that would need monitoring.