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How to Maintain a Healthy Smile

Published: 18 February 2013



From hygiene to ortho, here's what you can do to maintain your smile.

From what kind of toothbrush you should use to the variety of improvements that are available at your dentist's office, here's our primer on how to primp that smile.

1. It starts with your brush

If you're not already, swap out your hard toothbrush for one labelled soft or extra-soft to keep your teeth clean and gums pink and plump. "People have the misconception that if it's a hard toothbrush and it hurts when you brush, you're going to clean better," Dr. Benoit Soucy, D.M.D., M.Sc., director of clinical and scientific affairs with the Ottawa-based Canadian Dental Association. "Stiff bristles won't reach every nook and cranny that you're trying to clean and you can wear out the enamel on your teeth and damage your gums." But if you haven't mastered your brushing technique, try an electric toothbrush, which can make brushing easier.

2. Pick your paste wisely

It's time to do a reality check on toothpaste claims. For starters, whitening toothpastes are one of the least effective, notes Dr. Soucy. "It'll only provide a slightly improved cleaning on the surface of a stain," he says. "So if your problems are light surface staining, whitening toothpaste can help, but it won't be a spectacular change."

While Dr. Soucy says we all need fluoridated toothpaste to prevent decay, some other assertions on pastes are more effective—such as sensitive toothpastes. "Those work extremely well, but you have to keep using them if you want to keep the effect. As soon as you discontinue the use, the hypersensitivity comes back fairly rapidly," he says. Antigingivitis claims are also moderately effective.

3. Explore your whitening options

From in-office treatments, at-home strips or DIY paint-on gels, there are various whitening options to choose from. Dr. Brian Friedman, DDS, notes that in-office treatments generally consist of the dentist creating a custom-moulded tray for the patient in which the whitening gels are applied. Techniques vary from there—additional methods used might be a whitening lamp or laser to improve the look of the treatment. "Then I encourage people to take home the whitening trays made because once they have those trays, they're set for life because they can just whiten whenever they need it," says Dr. Friedman. The gels' concentrations in the dentist's office are higher and more precisely applied than those purchased in the store, so in-office treatments also cost more. "The higher the concentration in the gel, the higher the price," adds Dr. Soucy.

That said, if store-bought treatments fit your budget better, strips versus the one-size-fits-all pre-fabricated gel trays are a better option. "Trays that are prefabricated to fit everyone generally fit no one properly, so they require you to use more gels and expose you to useless amounts of gel that you will swallow," notes Dr. Soucy. "When you are using strips, the gel is much better contained within the strips, and you can form the strips to the shape of your mouth and avoid those problems." It's a good idea to check with your dentist before you use an at-home kit to ensure you don't have active decay or a periodontal issue that could interfere with the colouring. Plus, while you're there you can also ask if your stains can be polished off rather than resorting to whitening.

4. When in doubt, cover up

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Sometimes bleaching won't help the colour of teeth, especially if a tooth is discoloured, chipped or worse. "If there's a dramatic colour change you'd need veneers," notes Friedman. "Or if someone's a grinder and they want to restore their teeth to the original shape or length, you might put veneers or crowns on." Veneers are porcelain shells that are adhered to your teeth, while crowns are attached to the top of your tooth to become the new surface. (Think covering old metal fillings with a white crown.)

5. Straighten out without a trace

Forget the metal braces—these clear braces are much more discreet, as they are a plastic protector worn on the teeth to realign them. "It depends on how much change you need with your teeth, but invisalign will tell you the average treatment is about 15 months," notes Dr. Friedman. "That said, how long you need to wear them can vary anywhere from a few months to a couple of years."

While all of these options are readily available, dentists maintain that a good smile first comes from appropriate tooth care, including brushing properly twice a day, flossing and of course, those regular dentist checkups.

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