HEALTH BASICS

Dental care - adult

Adult dental care includes daily mouth care and professional checks that protect teeth, gums, and oral health.

WHAT IT IS
Care that protects adult teeth, gums, and mouth

WHERE IT COMES UP
Home cleaning and routine or problem-based dental visits

WHY IT MATTERS
Lower risk of decay, gum disease, and tooth loss

WHAT IT IS NOT
Not a disease or diagnosis

WHO TO ASK
Dentist, dental hygienist, or dental therapist

HOW IT IS CHECKED
Oral examination, with dental X-rays when clinically needed

Overview

Adult dental care means looking after your teeth, gums, tongue, and the rest of your mouth. It includes what you do at home and care provided by a dental professional.

Dental care is not a disease or diagnosis. It is a set of everyday practices, examinations, and treatments used to maintain oral health and identify problems early.

Good care usually includes brushing with fluoride toothpaste, cleaning between the teeth, and attending dental appointments at an interval based on your needs. Some people need more frequent follow-up because of active dental problems, dry mouth, previous gum disease, certain health conditions, or difficulty cleaning their teeth.

A dental appointment may include questions about your health and medicines, an examination of your mouth, and advice tailored to you. Dental X-rays are used when the findings could affect your care. They are not automatically required at every visit.

How it works

A sticky layer called dental plaque forms on teeth throughout the day. It contains bacteria. When these bacteria use sugars from food and drinks, they produce acids that can weaken the tooth surface and contribute to tooth decay.

Brushing removes plaque from the exposed tooth surfaces. Fluoride toothpaste helps make tooth enamel more resistant to acid and supports the repair of very early mineral loss.

A toothbrush cannot reach every space between teeth. Floss, interdental brushes, or another suitable tool can remove plaque from these areas. The best option depends on the size of the spaces, any dental work you have, and how easily you can use the tool.

Plaque that is not removed can harden into calculus , also called tartar. Calculus cannot usually be removed with normal brushing. A dental professional can remove it using hand instruments or powered scaling equipment.

During an examination, the dental professional checks your teeth, gums, bite, fillings, crowns, dentures, and soft tissues. This may include measuring the spaces around the teeth to look for gum disease. They may also examine your lips, tongue, cheeks, and the floor and roof of your mouth for unusual changes.

Professional cleaning and examinations support home care, but they do not replace it. Most plaque control happens through regular cleaning at home.

Why it matters for your health

Daily care helps reduce the chance of tooth decay and gum disease. It can also help fillings, crowns, bridges, implants, and dentures remain clean and functional.

Early gum inflammation is called gingivitis . The gums may become red, swollen, or bleed during cleaning. If inflammation progresses into the tissues and bone supporting the teeth, it is called periodontitis . Periodontitis can loosen teeth and may eventually lead to tooth loss.

Your general health can affect your mouth. For example, diabetes can make gum disease harder to control, while uncontrolled gum inflammation may make blood sugar management more difficult. Some medicines reduce saliva, causing dry mouth. Saliva protects the teeth, so persistent dryness can increase the risk of decay and mouth discomfort.

Dental visits also provide an opportunity to check for changes that are not caused by the teeth. These can include mouth ulcers, infections, and suspicious patches or lumps. Most mouth changes are not cancer, but changes that do not heal should be assessed.

Comfortable teeth and well-fitting dental appliances can support eating and speaking. Addressing problems early may also mean that simpler treatment is possible.

What can go wrong

Several conditions and situations are linked to inadequate cleaning, reduced saliva, dental injury, or delayed assessment.

Tooth decay , also called dental caries, occurs when repeated acid exposure causes permanent damage to the tooth. It may eventually create a cavity.

Gingivitis and periodontitis affect the gums and supporting tissues. Bleeding during brushing is often related to gum inflammation, although it does not confirm a diagnosis by itself.

Dental erosion is the loss of tooth surface caused by acids rather than bacteria. Acidic drinks, frequent vomiting, or stomach acid reaching the mouth can contribute.

Dental abscesses are collections of infection around a tooth or in the gum. They require prompt dental assessment and do not usually resolve through brushing alone.

Dry mouth can result from medicines, health conditions, dehydration, or treatments such as radiotherapy. It may make chewing, swallowing, speaking, or wearing dentures more difficult.

Dental injuries can crack, loosen, or knock out teeth. Prompt treatment can affect whether an injured tooth can be saved.

Arrange urgent dental care for severe or worsening tooth pain, a new facial swelling, pus or a bad taste with swelling, fever alongside a dental problem, or a broken or knocked-out tooth.

Seek emergency help for difficulty breathing or swallowing, rapidly increasing swelling of the mouth, face, or neck, uncontrolled bleeding, or a serious injury to the face or jaw.

A mouth ulcer, lump, red or white patch, or unexplained change that remains for more than three weeks needs prompt assessment by a dentist or medical professional. This is usually not an emergency, but it should not wait for a distant routine appointment.

What you can do

Your dental professional can show you techniques suited to your teeth, dental work, and hand movement. Practical steps include:

Mouthwash may be helpful for some people, but it does not replace brushing or cleaning between teeth. Ask whether you need one and when to use it, since using mouthwash immediately after brushing may wash away concentrated fluoride from toothpaste.

Tell the dental team about your medicines, allergies, pregnancy, health conditions, previous reactions to treatment, and any blood-thinning medicine. Do not stop prescribed medicine before dental care unless the relevant prescriber or dental professional has given you specific

instructions.

Keep a record of persistent pain, bleeding, dryness, ulcers, swelling, or sensitivity, including when it started and what makes it better or worse. If you have dry mouth, ask whether a medicine review, saliva substitute, or higher-fluoride product is appropriate. Prescription-strength products should only be used when recommended for you.

- Brush twice a day for about two minutes using fluoride toothpaste
- Clean every tooth surface, including along the gumline
- Spit out toothpaste after brushing rather than immediately rinsing it away
- Clean between the teeth each day with floss or an appropriate interdental tool
- Limit how often teeth are exposed to sugary foods and drinks
- Avoid smoking and other tobacco products
- Wear a properly fitted mouthguard for activities with a dental injury risk
- Attend dental reviews at the interval recommended for your individual needs

Common questions

Do all adults need a dental check every six months?

No single interval suits everyone. The timing should reflect your current oral health, previous disease, likelihood of new problems, and ability to care for your mouth. Ask when your next review is due and why that interval is suitable.

Should I stop flossing if my gums bleed?

Do not force floss into the gums, but gentle cleaning usually remains important. Bleeding can occur when gums are inflamed or when technique causes injury. Arrange an assessment if bleeding is persistent, frequent, or unexplained.

Is an electric toothbrush better than a manual one?

Either can clean effectively when used well. An electric brush may be easier if you have limited hand movement, braces, or difficulty using a manual brush. A dental professional can help check your technique.

Do dental X-rays happen at every check-up?

Not necessarily. The decision is based on your symptoms, examination, dental history, age, and risk of problems that cannot be seen directly. Ask what the image is intended to check and how it may change your care.

Can I wait until a tooth hurts before seeing a dentist?

Pain is not always the first sign of tooth decay or gum disease. Routine examinations can identify some problems before they become painful. New pain, swelling, trauma, or a lasting mouth change should be assessed rather than left until the next planned visit.

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