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By Mens Health

Infectious Smiles



Your filthy mouth may have you headed for a heart attack—unless you follow this dental plan

There are two options when it comes to oral hygiene: Treat your teeth like gold, or buy gold teeth. The latter is a tough look to pull off. Unless you're a rapper (or, like Flavor Flav, a rapper-turned-reality-TV-star-turned-boy-toy-to-blonde-Amazon), women tend to frown on 24-karat caps.

Aesthetics aside, there's an even better reason to go for option one: Your life depends on it. Unhealthy mouths unleash bacteria into the bloodstream, where the bugs travel to vital organs. As a result, your chance of developing diabetes can go up, your stroke risk can quadruple, and your risk of a heart attack can spike up to 14 times higher. Of course, these are all worst-case scenarios. The best case? The ligaments tethering your teeth to your jaw disintegrate, and you start paying attention to Fixodent commercials.

Don't let it happen to you. Open up and apply these eight mouth guards, and we practically guarantee you'll live long and die without dentures.

Plaque

When you wake up tomorrow, run your tongue over your teeth. Feel that? It's plaque, a mossy mix of germs, dead cells, and saliva. Left alone, it becomes a breeding ground for bacteria that cause cavities and gingivitis, a.k.a. inflamed gums. And gingivitis can lead to the ligament-destroying oral disease called periodontitis, says Marjorie Jeffcoat, D.M.D., dean of the school of dental medicine at the University of Pennsylvania. "You can have an infection the size of the palm of your hand and not know it."

Grab a cup for protection. If it weren't for afternoon tea, Brits would have no teeth at all. A recent Chicago College of Dentistry study showed that people who rinsed their mouths with black tea multiple times a day had less plaque buildup than those who swished water. "Polyphenols in tea suppress the bacterial enzyme that triggers plaque accumulation," says Christine D. Wu, Ph.D., the lead study author. "Drinking tea a few times a day could have the same effect." Choose iced or hot tea, but try to down it during your meals.

Worried about staining? Go green. "Green tea contains the same polyphenols as black tea," says Wu, "but it isn't fully fermented, and fermentation contributes to the staining."

Pull strings. Flossing belongs to that special category of onerous chores that includes cleaning the gutters, but it has to be done. What about the research showing that rinsing with Listerine (or one of its clones) is as good as flossing? A new study in the Journal of the American Dental Association found that swishing with Listerine and flossing is most effective of all. The key is matching floss to teeth.

"If you have rough fillings, use waxed floss," says Dr. Jeffcoat. "If you have bigger spaces between the teeth, consider braided floss." And for unequivocally average teeth? Go with unwaxed floss; the friction will pull out more plaque. In terms of technique, Dr. Jeffcoat says to listen as you slide the string. "When it squeaks, you know the plaque is gone."

Enamel

Just like the paint on a Plymouth, your enamel is shield and showcase. Its enemies: erosion and abrasion. Erosion is the breakdown of enamel by acids, while abrasion is wear from brushing. Either way, worn enamel sabotages smiles and lets bacteria tunnel into teeth.

Stick it to yourself. Sugarless gum is powerful medicine for your mouth; numerous studies have shown that chewing the sticky stuff stimulates the delivery of building-block minerals into damaged enamel. Most recently, researchers in Japan showed that people who chew sugarless gum fortified with the tongue-twisting ingredient casein phosphopeptide-amorphous calcium phosphate (or CPP-ACP) can patch up twice as much enamel as those masticating gum minus CPP-ACP. Look for sugarless gums, such as Trident White, that list Recaldent as an active ingredient.

Take the softer, easier way. Pair heavy hand pressure with a firm-bristled toothbrush and you're all set--to clean grout. "Some people actually brush grooves in their teeth," says Bruce Reuben, D.D.S., an oral surgeon in Chicago. To protect and polish your enamel, pick up a soft-bristled brush with tapered tips, such as the Colgate 360. Researchers at the University of Pennsylvania compared this type with a soft brush with rounded tips and found that the former removed more plaque while remaining gentle on teeth.

Still brushing the heck out of your bicuspid? Switch to your nondominant hand. Once you're used to exerting less force, switch back.

Cavities

Children are cavity magnets, but so are adults. "As we grow older, we might actually be more prone to tooth decay," says Richard Price, D.D.S., a consumer advisor for the American Dental Association. What's worse, age, and the gum recession that accompanies it, puts us at risk of a variation called "root cavities." "When the gum pulls back, a bit of root is exposed," explains Dr. Price. The root's only protection is cementum, a soft coating that's no match for the bacteria that cause cavities.

Commandeer the cheese cart. A quick refresher: Eating sweets causes the pH level of your saliva to plummet, transforming plaque into tooth-dissolving acid. But follow cheesecake with cheese and your pH level will stay steady. A study review published in Nutrition Reviews that looked at the pH-boosting properties of 12 cheeses shows that while provolone is pretty good, Cheddar's better. In fact, aged Cheddar, Gouda, Monterey Jack, and mozzarella raised pH levels highest. And one bite is all you need; the study subjects ate less than a quarter ounce.

Eat for two. Someone move your cheese? Finish your dinner before you dive into dessert. As you eat a meal, the plaque on your teeth absorbs some of the fat, fiber, and protein of the food, filling

up space that would otherwise be occupied by sugar. "If the plaque is saturated with the food you just ate, the sugar you eat afterward can't sink in," says Dr. Price. Same rule goes for any other time you're sizing up a sweet snack: Try to eat a little real food first and you'll block out the sugar that follows.

Tartar

We aren't talking fish sauce. Tartar is a special kind of crud that's created when excess calcium in your saliva combines with plaque. The result is a brownish-yellow deposit above the gum line that provides a microscopic toehold for even more bacteria.

Waste it with paste. Fluoride fights cavities, but it can't touch tartar. For that, you need a toothpaste containing pyrophosphate, a chemical that disrupts the calcification process. Start using a tartar-control toothpaste now and your dental hygienist will do less scraping later. And in case you're tempted to stick with your regular toothpaste and just use a tartar-control mouthwash, consider this: "One place that mouthwash does not clean is where the teeth touch each other," says Dr. Price.

Get small. "You see your biggest tartar buildup where the saliva ducts enter the mouth," says Dr. Price. "It's like a river laying down silt." Unfortunately, these hot spots--the backs of your lower front teeth and the outer sides of your top molars--are difficult to reach with a full-size toothbrush. Choose one with a small head. And when you tackle the backs of your lower front teeth, turn the brush perpendicular to the floor, then scrub up and down.

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