looking after your mouth
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Dentists look after the whole mouth, not just teeth, so they talk about caring for the mouth and ‘oral health’ not just teeth and dental health.

Together, you and your dentist can do a lot to keep your whole mouth healthy and prevent the two main dental diseases, dental decay and gum disease.

There are four simple messages for looking after oral health highlighted in the following pages. They are based on scientific research and endorsed by the British Dental Association and all the UK’s dentists.

1 have fewer sugar-containing foods and drinks

The number of times that sugar enters the mouth is the most important factor determining the rate of dental decay, so try to avoid sugary snacks and drinks between meals.

Also, avoid frequent consumption of acidic drinks, such as fruit juices and both the regular and diet types of fizzy drinks as the acid they contain can attack the teeth.

Milk is the only drink small babies need. Later on, diluted fruit juice is fine at mealtimes, and milk and water are good at any time.

If you use baby juices:
- Always follow manufacturers’ instructions on usage and dilution.
- Serve only at mealtimes and keep drinking times short.
- Never leave infants alone with any drink.
- Never use drinks on a dummy or as a comforter.
- Ideally serve from a spoon, trainer beaker or cup, but not from a bottle.
- Do not give at bedtime or during the night.
2. **Clean your teeth twice a day with fluoride toothpaste**

**Protect your teeth and gums**

- You can help prevent gum disease by brushing your teeth thoroughly, twice daily, to remove dental plaque, a sticky deposit of bacteria on the tooth surface.

- You may need to use other dental hygiene aids (for example, floss) if your dentist or hygienist advises this.

- Regular toothbrushing by itself will not prevent all tooth decay, but there is a definite benefit from regular brushing with a fluoride toothpaste. Fluoride in toothpaste and in tap water helps teeth to become more resistant to attack by acids, which are produced by plaque when sugars are eaten. Fluoride also helps teeth to re-mineralise or re-harden after attack.

- Chewing sugarfree gum after meals and snacks containing sugar also helps protect teeth against decay – by stimulating saliva which helps to neutralise acid and repair early decay.

**Brushing tips**

- For effective brushing, use a soft to medium brush and a gentle circular ‘scrub’ technique, with the bristles aiming where the tooth and gum meet. Your dentist or hygienist will show you how.

- Choose a brush with a small head which allows it to reach all parts of the mouth easily.

- Don’t keep a brush for more than about three months or after the bristles have started to spread out.

- Supervise children’s brushing until at least the age of seven and only use a small pea-size amount of toothpaste.
3 support water fluoridation

Topping up the natural fluoride levels in water is a safe and very effective way of reducing dental decay. This can mean up to 50 per cent less tooth decay in areas which have fluoride in the water. Support water fluoridation if its introduction is debated in your community.

4 visit your dentist every year

Check-ups

Yearly check-ups are important, whether or not you have your own natural teeth, because:

- The whole mouth can be examined and advice given.
- Thorough cleaning of teeth by a dentist or hygienist helps to control gum disease. Your own toothbrushing is important but you may need professional cleaning as well.
- Where a tooth has decayed to a point where it cannot use saliva and fluoride to mend itself, early detection and appropriate treatment are important.
- Other problems can occur in the mouth which may be life-threatening. Oral cancer is an example. Again, early detection is important – even vital.

Do you need to go more often?

- Children may need to be seen more frequently than once a year. Orthodontic treatment (straightening of teeth) may need to be planned.
- Frequent check-ups may be necessary for adults where there is a particular gum disease or decay problem.
- Talk to a dentist about how often you should have a check-up – it can vary from person to person.

Finding a dentist

If you do not have a dentist, ask your friends or family to recommend one. Or ask your Health Authority (Health Board in Scotland or Health and Social Services Board in Northern Ireland) to tell you about local dentists offering treatment under the National Health Service.
remember:

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