

HealthySpaces

Keep flossing for that gloss

Joyce Teo finds out why we need to floss our teeth every day and lists the various products

The daily flossing of your teeth helps to keep them healthy.

Despite recent reports that there is a lack of strong evidence showing that flossing can prevent cavities or severe gum disease, dental specialists in Singapore maintain that flossing is important for oral hygiene.

"Flossing helps to get rid of plaque and food debris trapped between teeth," said Dr Helena Lee, a periodontist from Specialist Dental Group. "These cannot be removed by brushing, which works well only on exposed tooth surfaces."

"If flossing is not done and plaque accumulates, it would lead to gum disease and tooth decay."

Flossing is the use of dental floss or thread to clean between the teeth.

Dr Lee said that, after 23 years of being a dentist, she is convinced of its benefits.

Gum disease, for instance, occurs when the tissues that support your teeth become infected. It does not occur overnight, but progresses through various stages.

Bleeding gums is an early symptom that is often dismissed, said Dr Lee. "If left untreated, it may lead to gum disease."

This is when the infection destroys the bone that supports the teeth. The teeth will become loose and will have to be extracted, said Dr Jerry Lim of Orchard Scotts Dental.

These are some tools for flossing:

STRING FLOSS

Dr Lim: String floss products in the

market are either waxed or unwaxed. When the space between teeth is tight, a waxed floss would help.

Dr Lee: Unwaxed floss does not have a coating and is thinner than waxed floss. It makes a squeaking sound when used. Some people prefer unwaxed floss as it does not leave wax remnants on the teeth.

Waxed floss can easily slide between the teeth.

There are many different brands. The choice can be made based on factors such as the shape of your teeth or crowding in the mouth. Ask your dentist to advise what is best for you.

DENTAL TAPE

Dr Lee: This is also known as wide floss and is recommended for people whose interdental gaps are wider than average.

INTERDENTAL BRUSHES

Dr Lee: These are small brushes used to clean large interdental gaps. These gaps are usually the result of periodontal disease, where bone loss has occurred.

These brushes are useful for those undergoing orthodontic treatment, as they can be used to clean the teeth between the brackets.

Those with larger hands may find such brushes useful too.

TOOTHPICK

Dr Lim: A toothpick would work if the gap between the teeth is big. But if the gap is small, it is very difficult to use one to remove food that is stuck between the teeth.



In fact, a toothpick might make it worse as it will push the gum and enlarge the space between the teeth.

ELECTRIC FLOSSING TOOLS

Dr Lim: The new alternatives to traditional string flossing products are the Airfloss and the Waterpik.

The Airfloss uses powerful bursts of air to remove food debris that is stuck between your teeth, while the Waterpik uses a continuous stream of water to do so.

However, these tools are not

superior to manual flossing with string floss. Sliding the floss up and down the side of the teeth removes plaque much more effectively.

MOUThWASH

Dr Lim: At the moment, the use of mouthwash cannot replace flossing as bacterial plaque can only be removed mechanically.

Mouthwash helps to reduce the plaque but it does not remove the bacterial plaque effectively.

Inculcate the flossing habit in children once they have developed manual dexterity. PHOTO: ISTOCKPHOTO

How to floss

Dr Helena Lee, a periodontist from Specialist Dental Group, shares tips on flossing:

Do not be stingy with floss

Use a 30cm-long string of floss, which allows you to wrap it around the middle fingers of each hand. As you floss and particles are picked up with the flossing, use a new section of the string for the next area.

Floss once a day

Plaque builds up around and between teeth daily. Most plaque hardens into tartar within days, so flossing should be done every day. Tartar build-up can cause gum disease, and tartar can only be removed with special tools at the dental clinic.

Bleeding a little is normal

If you are flossing for the first time, it is quite common for your gums to bleed. If this happens, it is because your gum tissue is irritated by the bacteria in the plaque, causing it to bleed at the slightest amount of pressure.

The bleeding should stop as your gums become healthier. See your dentist if the bleeding persists.

Do children need to floss too?

Once a child's primary, or baby, teeth start to touch each other, parents can help to floss their teeth. This occurs between the ages of two and six, Dr Lee said. Even though baby teeth are not permanent, it is important to care for them as they will last until your child turns 12.

Dr Jerry Lim of Orchard Scotts Dental said the habit of flossing should be inculcated once a child has developed manual dexterity by the ages of eight and nine.

Joyce Teo

HelpAtYourFingertips

Debunking common myths about breast cancer

Almost all breast tumours, whether cancerous or not, are not painful. Pain tends to result from benign cysts, or an inflammation or infection. As breast cancers are usually not painful, women are advised to do a breast self-examination every month.

Mammograms can help save lives by detecting breast cancer early.

Yet, there are some who are afraid to go for the test as they are afraid of what it might detect.

Others think they can prevent cancer by eating certain foods or living certain lifestyles.

The truth is, anyone can get cancer. And, just as true, many beliefs about the disease are unfounded.

Dr Tan Yah Yuen, a breast surgeon at Mount Elizabeth Hospital, debunks some common myths:

MYTH: Superfoods and organic food can prevent or treat cancer.

FACT: There is no scientific evidence that any special superfoods or an organic diet can prevent breast cancer or cure it

once the cancer has developed.

There are, however, recommendations on dietary habits that may reduce the risk of developing breast cancer.

These include a healthy diet focusing on plant sources as well as less fatty and oily food.

The intake of red meats and processed foods should be limited and wholegrains are preferred over processed grains.

Women should limit their alcohol intake to less than one serving a day.

The consumption of superfoods containing antioxidants may help to lower the breast cancer risk.

Women should avoid being overweight. Being overweight raises the estrogen levels in the body, which can help breast cancer cells to grow.

MYTH: I avoid wearing a tight-fitting bra as it can cut off lymph drainage and contribute to the development of breast cancer.

FACT: There is no evidence that wearing a tight bra will limit the lymphatic drainage of the breast.

The lymphatic drainage in our body is generally very efficient, unless it is directly affected by surgery or a disease.

MYTH: A breast lump cannot be cancerous as it is not painful.

FACT: Almost all breast tumours, whether cancerous or not, are not painful. Pain tends to result from benign cysts, or an inflammation or infection.

As breast cancers are usually not painful, women are advised to do a breast self-examination

every month. Regardless of whether there is any pain, those who find a new breast lump should have it evaluated by a medical professional.

MYTH: I am not at risk of breast cancer because there is no family history of cancer.

FACT: Seventy per cent of newly-diagnosed breast cancer patients do not have any family history of breast cancer.

If one has a family history, the risk will be higher (but this does not mean that the development of breast cancer is a certainty).

The absence of any family history of the disease does not mean that a woman is not at risk. Regardless of whether there is a family history, women should go for breast screening.

MYTH: I am afraid to go for breast screening because I don't want to have chemotherapy or have my breast removed.

FACT: Not all breast cancers are treated the same way. In the early stages, the breast does not always need to be removed.

Chemotherapy may not always be necessary if the cancer is in the very early stages. Hence, women should go for breast screening so that the cancer can be diagnosed early.

This would reduce the chances of having to have the breast removed or the need for chemotherapy.

Joyce Teo

• This is the first of a two-part series on breast cancer.

Mount Elizabeth™

DON'T HOPE. BE SURE. EARLY DETECTION SAVES LIVES. YOURS.

1 in 16 women will be diagnosed with breast cancer in her lifetime.*

Most women are aware of the risks of breast cancer, but many ignore it because it can be frightening. Discovered and treated early, the 5-year survival rate can improve to more than 90%.*

Face your fears. A mammogram can help you gain greater control over your future health.

* Singapore Cancer Registry Annual Registry Report Trends in Cancer Incidence in Singapore 2010 - 2014

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