

Teeth care

Dental decay is the most common disease that affects teeth, but it can be prevented. Decay is caused by plaque, a sticky film found on teeth. Bacteria found in plaque change sugars into acids, which produce holes (cavities) in the teeth. Plaque cannot be removed by rinsing. Toothbrushing with a fluoride toothpaste or cleaning by a dental professional are the best ways to remove plaque. Fluoridated drinking water and toothpastes have reduced the amount of dental decay in Australia.

Plaque also causes gum disease

Gum disease is caused by plaque, which builds up on the gumline of teeth and causes gums to become inflamed. Eventually plaque may destroy the fibres and bone that hold teeth in place. Regular removal of plaque from teeth by toothbrushing will reduce gum disease.

How to prevent decay

Suggestions to protect your teeth include:

- Clean your teeth at least twice a day after meals.
- Low fluoride toothpaste is best for children under six years of age. Introduce a low fluoride toothpaste from approximately 18 months of age.
- Enjoy a wide variety of nutritious foods.
- If you eat sugary foods and snacks, limit their intake – especially between meals.
- Drink plenty of tap water – especially if fluoridated.
- Milk and flavoured milks are preferable to other sugary drinks. If you do drink acidic and sugary drinks such as soft drinks, sports drinks, cordials and fruit juices, limit how often and how much of these you drink.
- If you live in a non-fluoridated area, seek dental professional advice about the use of fluoride toothpaste for children. A dental professional may advise more frequent use of fluoride toothpaste, commencement of toothpaste at a younger age or earlier commencement of use of standard toothpaste.

Regular dental check-ups are important

Regular dental check-ups (at least every two years) help to keep teeth and gums healthy. The Child Health Record recommends children's teeth should be checked twice before they are three and a half years of age. This might be done by a maternal and child health nurse, dental professional or paediatrician.

Dental sealants

Dental sealants protect children's second (adult) teeth from decay. Sealants are painted on new molars to stop food from collecting on the chewing surfaces of teeth. Not all children need sealants. Ask about these when you see your dental professional.

Protection of teeth and mouth from trauma during sport

Oral trauma can include damage to the teeth, gums, tongue and lips, or fractures of the jawbones. Suggestions to limit trauma include:

- Wear a professionally fitted mouthguard when playing and training for sport if there is a risk of dental injury.
- Some sports and recreational activities require a full-faced helmet or face guard.

Other healthy habits

Oral cancers include cancers of the lip, tongue, gums, floor of mouth and other parts of the mouth and throat. Use of tobacco and heavy consumption of alcohol are major risk factors for oral cancers, while sun exposure is an additional risk factor for cancers of the lip. Suggestions to reduce these risks include:

- If you smoke, quit for good.

- Limit your alcohol intake.
- Protect your face from the sun.

When to see a dental professional

Regular dental check-ups are important. You should also visit a dental professional if you have:

- **A toothache** – this may be caused by dental decay.
- **Bleeding gums** – this may be caused by gum disease. Some viral infections can also make gums inflamed.
- **Dental trauma** – a tooth may be loosened or knocked out. If a permanent tooth is knocked out, wrap it in plastic or place it in milk and seek dental advice immediately. It may be possible to put the tooth back.

Where to get help

- A dental professional
- Royal Dental Hospital Clinic Tel. (03) 9341 1000 or 1800 833 039, 8.30am to 5pm, Monday to Friday
- Dental Health Services Victoria, Emergency Service Tel. (03) 9341 1040 8am to 9.15pm, Monday to Friday; 9am to 9.15pm, Weekends/Public Holidays
- Royal Children's Hospital Tel. (03) 9345 5344, 9am to 5pm, Monday to Friday. Tel. (03) 9345 5522 after hours

Things to remember

- Clean your teeth at least twice a day after meals and have regular dental check-ups to maintain healthy teeth and prevent tooth decay.
- Limit sugary foods and drinks, drink plenty of tap water (especially if fluoridated) and enjoy a wide variety of nutritious foods.
- If you live in a non-fluoridated area, seek dental professional advice about the use of fluoride toothpaste for children.
- Protect your face and mouth when playing sport.
- Quit smoking and limit your alcohol intake.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

Dental Health Services Victoria

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