

Make healthy teeth a lifelong habit

By Teddi Dineley Johnson

What's in a smile? Cheer, pleasure, delight. But poor oral health can tarnish your smile and cause health problems.

Preventing tooth decay and gum disease is an essential part of general health and well-being all through life, but without some tender loving care, the healthy teeth and gums you had at age

3 won't be there when you're 83, nevermind 23.

"The main dental problems are tooth decay and gum disease," says Howard Pollick, BDS,

MPH, a clinical professor at the University of California, San Francisco, School of Dentistry. "They are the most

costly and the most prevalent, and lead to pain and infection."

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, tooth decay affects more than one-fourth of U.S. children ages 2 to 5, and half of kids ages 12 to 15. Low-income kids are hit even harder by the problems associated with tooth decay, which can include poor school attendance, weight loss and low self-esteem.

Adults suffer too. In fact, a whopping 25 percent of people older than 60 have lost all of their teeth. The two main culprits? Tooth decay, which affects more than 90 percent of adults older than 40, and gum disease, which is a serious problem for 5 percent to 15 percent of adults.

But here's the good news: Most oral health diseases can be prevented. If you take care of your teeth, eat a balanced diet and visit your dentist regularly, healthy teeth and a shining smile can be yours throughout life.

Brush up on the facts

The American Dental Association recommends that you brush your teeth twice a day with a fluoride toothpaste and a soft-bristled brush. Brushing is the best way to remove decay-causing plaque.



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Choose a toothbrush that fits your mouth comfortably and allows you to reach all of your teeth easily. Brush the front, back and chewing surfaces of your teeth as well as your tongue.

Learn how to take care of your toothbrush, too. Buy a new one every three or four months — sooner if the bristles start to bend over. Rinse your toothbrush with tap water when you finish brushing and store it upright in a container to air-dry.

Keep the tooth fairy merry

Good dental health habits should start early.

"Take your 12-month-old to the dentist or ask your pediatrician or nurse practitioner to look at your child's teeth and give you advice on how to take care of them," Pollick says.

Tooth cleaning should begin as soon as that first tooth pops through the gums. Parents should wipe new teeth every day with a clean, damp cloth. As more teeth emerge, switch to a small, soft toothbrush. It takes some skill for kids to brush their teeth properly on their own, so until they're 4 or 5, do it for them — twice a day — until they can handle the toothbrush on their own. Even after that, monitor their brushing to make sure they're doing it right.

Begin using a fluoride toothpaste when your child turns 2. Fluoride stops decay in its tracks and can keep tooth enamel strong and solid. For children younger than 6, use no more than a pea-sized amount of fluoride toothpaste, because while fluoride is important for fighting cavities, young children who swallow too much of it can



>> For more tips, visit www.ada.org or www.cdc.gov/oralhealth

develop white spots on their permanent teeth.

No matter your age, flossing should also be a regular habit.

"Many people are keeping their teeth now well into their 80s and 90s and they need to keep them healthy," Pollick says.

Flossing helps remove plaque and food particles from between your teeth and under your gum line. If you have trouble



handling dental floss, the American Dental Association suggests that you ask your dentist to show you how to use other kinds of cleaners, such as special brushes, picks or sticks.

You only have to floss once a day, but be consistent about it, says Pollick, who recommends flossing before brushing.



American Public Health Association

Attack your plaque

Plaque is a clear film that forms on your teeth 24 hours a day. The sticky stuff plays a huge role in causing tooth decay, because the germs in plaque love sugar and gobble it up, changing it into acids that can damage the hard enamel that covers your teeth. That's how cavities begin, so curb that sweet tooth!

Plaque can irritate gums, making them red, tender or bleed easily. As gums pull away from the teeth, pockets form and fill with bacteria. Left untreated, the bone and tissues around teeth can be destroyed, leading to tooth loss.

One way to prevent tooth decay and gum disease is to snack smart and choose foods that don't have a lot of sugar.

