



Protecting those pearly whites

Dental health seems easy – just take care of your teeth. But is it that simple? Dr Jason Gray answers some common questions



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Studio

Q. How often should people go to the dentist?

A. As expected every person has a different mouth and differing susceptibility to oral diseases. A healthy mouth with no restorations, no gum disease and exceptional oral hygiene may be able to comfortably have a dental check only once every 12 months. However, this is rare. Most people should have continuing dental care every six months.

Q. How often do you need to change your toothbrush?

A. Your toothbrush should be replaced every three months or when the bristles start to wear, whichever comes first. That shaggy dog toothbrush is no longer very effective, and it tends to indicate overzealous brushing. Also, it is often a wise idea to consider replacing your toothbrush after a cold, sore throat or mouth infection to prevent the accumulation of micro-organisms on the brush which may result in re-infection.

Q. What are the worst foods and drinks for your teeth?

A. Sticky sweet foods are the worst for teeth. Bacteria that cause tooth decay metabolise sugar to create an acid which effectively dissolves tooth structure. The retentive sugars such as sticky sweets stay on the tooth for longer. Recently sports drinks and soft drinks have caused a notable rise in tooth decay.

Q. How can you combat bad breath?

A. The most common cause of bad breath is gum disease. The severity of bad breath can be reduced by regular continuing dental care with either your dentist or dental hygienist. Other causes of bad breath include the presence of decayed teeth trapping food which decomposes in your mouth, your diet, and other systemic illnesses such as gastrointestinal disorders or dry mouth which can be caused by any of the 'anti' medications (eg anti-hypertensives, anti-depressants).

Q. What's the number one misconception about oral health/hygiene?

A. Many people and health care professionals have failed to note the importance of oral health in relation to whole body health. Teeth and

gums had been left separate from the rest of the body.

It is now well known there are numerous very strong systemic links to poor oral health. Gum disease has been linked to heart disease, stroke, diabetes, premature births. Studies have shown that treating the gum disease can improve the medical condition.

How do you find a good dentist?

A. Like any health care provider there are two sides to the person – the communicator and the technician. Obviously it is extremely important that your dentist be as skilled and up-to date as possible. Find a dentist who is a perpetual student. Look for evidence of the continuing education courses he/she has attended, and any additional qualifications. Before undertaking any cosmetic treatment, ask what experience this dentist has in undertaking these difficult cases. Ask to see previous cases that the dentist has completed and look for testimonials. You also need to find a dentist you can communicate freely with and feel comfortable with.

Q. How important is flossing?

A. Flossing is imperative to good oral hygiene. Some dentists have a saying: 'You only need to floss the teeth you want to keep'. Flossing is the only way to clean between teeth. If we don't floss we are not cleaning up to 50 per cent of our tooth surfaces. This can result in tooth decay and gum disease.

Q. What do I do about sensitive teeth?

A. There are numerous causes of sensitive teeth and the treatment of choice is dependent on a diagnosis of the cause of the sensitivity. Probably the most common cause of sensitivity is due to the presence of receding gums. This may be caused by a combination of teeth clenching/grinding and over-zealous teeth brushing with a firm bristled toothbrush. This receding gum will expose the underlying tooth structure (dentine) which has nerve fibres which will be stimulated by hot, cold, air and touching. This can be relieved with the use of the 'sensitive toothpastes', placement of a dental restoration to cover over the defect at the neck of the tooth, or ozone therapy (ozone delivered to the tooth can seal the tubules the nerves live in). Sensitivity may also be caused by the presence of decay or a cracked tooth. An appropriate restoration is required – this may involve a crown.