

Oral Hygiene Instructions

If you thought brushing and flossing were important before you got braces... well, you were right! People undergoing orthodontic treatment need to be even more dedicated to good oral hygiene.

Braces trap food very easily, which contributes to plaque formation. If plaque is not carefully removed from teeth and from around braces, patients run the risk of developing gum disease, dental decay and bad breath.

Plaque is a mixture of bacteria, debris and bits of food. The bacteria feed on sugars and produce acids. The acids can irritate your gums, erode the enamel on your teeth and contribute to bad breath.

It's very important to remove the plaque thoroughly and often. Then, when your braces come off, the surfaces of your teeth underneath the braces will be healthy and strong. Here are some tips to help:

Brushing

Use a soft-bristle toothbrush. Soft bristles are better than medium or hard bristles at getting into those nooks and crannies around your braces. They also don't irritate your gums.

Some companies make toothbrushes especially for people with braces. Known as bi-level brushes, they have longer bristles on the edges and shorter ones in the middle. This type of brush allows you to clean the area above and below the brackets as well as the brackets themselves.

The most important thing is to look for a brush that's soft and approved by the American Dental Association (ADA). After that, the size of the brush, the shape of the handle and other variations are up to you.

What about an electric toothbrush? It's not necessary, but if you have one, it's safe to use it on your braces. Just be careful not to hit the plastic back of the brush against the brackets on your braces because it can damage them. Also, it should be used on a moderate setting so as not to break or loosen braces.

Brush at least three times a day. It is best to brush after meals to make sure there's no food trapped in or around your braces. If you are not able to brush after lunch, at least rinse your mouth with water very thoroughly.

Brush for at least two to three minutes each time. It's best to use a watch or timer to make sure you are brushing long enough.

Brushing should be done slowly and carefully. It's important to brush the braces and all the surfaces of the teeth, meaning the inside and outside surface as well as the chewing surfaces. Pay special attention to the areas between your brackets and your gums.

Flossing

Floss at least once a day. It might seem like you can't possibly floss while you have braces, but you can and you should. Special flossing products can help you get into the space between the wires and your gum line. These include floss threaders and a special kind of floss. When your braces are first put on, a Clinical Specialist should review flossing techniques. If you're not sure you're doing it right, ask Dr. Wong during your next visit.

Fluoride

Use a fluoride toothpaste. It doesn't really matter which one — just make sure it has the ADA seal of approval.

We may recommend that you use an over-the-counter fluoride rinse. These rinses usually provide enough fluoride to help protect and strengthen teeth during orthodontic treatment.

Consider an office treatment. You can get more fluoride — usually in the form of a gel or varnish — from your dentist during a regular visit. If you have a history of decay, your dentist may suggest this type of treatment. During orthodontic treatment, see your family dentist for a complete examination every six months, or as directed by your dentist.

Rubber-tipped and end-tuft or single-tuft brushes — These are special brushes that help you to get into those nooks and crannies, as well as between your teeth. The end-tuft or single-tuft brushes look something like pipe cleaners.

Eating Right

While you're wearing braces, you need to think twice about eating foods that could increase your risk of cavities. You should also avoid anything that might damage your brackets or wires. Frequently breaking your braces will add to your overall treatment time.

Stay away from hard and sticky foods. Caramel, hard candy, gum - you get the idea. They can damage your braces and get stuck in the wires and brackets. While the food's stuck there, it provides lots of sugar for cavity-causing bacteria to munch on. Also, do not chew on ice cubes.

Cut down on all sugary foods. You can still have a limited amount of sweets and soda, but the more sugars you eat, the greater your risk of tooth decay. Always brush after eating sugary foods or candy.

It's not just what you eat, but also when you eat it. Frequent snacking on sugary foods is worse than eating those foods with a non-sugary meal. Don't eat sugary foods or candy before going to bed without brushing. The more chances you give the bacteria to turn sugars into acids, the higher your risk of decay.

Dental Visits

Don't ignore your dentist just because you're visiting an orthodontist regularly. It is still important to visit your dentist for a checkup and cleaning. You should go at least twice a year, or as often as your dentist and orthodontist recommend.