

DENTAL HEALTH

Tips You Can Smile About: Keeping Your Teeth And Gums Healthier

(NAPSA)—Much like a house or car, your body requires maintenance. That includes your teeth and gums.

However, many people may not be aware of the best ways to take care of their teeth and gums and which foods can contribute to good oral health.

According to David Russell, DMD, associate professor and associate dean of clinical affairs at Tufts University School of Dental Medicine in Boston, good oral health, good eating habits and good general health are all linked.

Says Russell, “Your teeth are meant to last as long as you do, and there are easy steps you can take to maintain oral health.”

He also notes that most cases of tooth decay and gum disease are caused by a buildup of plaque—a combination of food, saliva and bacteria that settles on teeth. If it is not removed each day with brushing and flossing, plaque will harden into tartar, which is difficult to remove with home care.

Problems caused by plaque and tartar include:

- Cavities—soft areas in teeth that can promote tooth decay;
- Gingivitis—swollen gums that can cause more serious disease if left untreated;
- Periodontal disease—disease of the gums and jawbone that can lead to tooth loss;
- Abscess—infection that can arise from an untreated cavity or tooth infection;
- Toothaches, inability to use teeth, or bad breath.

Plaque and tartar can also con-



Photo courtesy of Tufts University photography

Experts say good oral health, good eating habits and good general health are all linked. Avoid snacks high in sugar or starch and aim for at least two servings of calcium a day to keep teeth strong.

tribute to a range of health problems outside the mouth, including higher risk of heart disease, stroke and certain types of cancer.

Besides visiting your dental hygienist/dentist at least twice each year for professional cleanings and oral exams, Dr. Russell suggests these easy tips for keeping your teeth and mouth healthy:

- Brush teeth at least twice a day and, if possible, after meals and before bedtime. Use a soft-bristled brush and angle it into the gumline and between teeth, where most plaque gets trapped. Be gentle when brushing—you don't have to scrub to remove plaque. Replace your toothbrush every three to four months (more frequently for children).
- Use a toothpaste that contains fluoride. Fluoride, a mineral that helps harden tooth enamel,

can protect teeth from cavities and tooth decay.

- Use dental floss each day to clean around and between teeth and under your gumline. Ask your dental hygienist to show you how to floss.

- Avoid tobacco and limit alcohol. Smokers and other tobacco users are more likely to develop gum disease than those who don't use tobacco. Excessive tobacco and alcohol use increases the risk of oral and throat cancers, especially when used in combination.

- Eat healthful foods to help the body defend against oral infections. Avoid high-sugar or high-starch snacks that can promote tooth decay and aim for at least two servings of calcium a day to keep teeth strong. Calcium-rich foods include milk products, green leafy vegetables, and canned fish with soft bones, such as salmon and sardines.

- Drink plenty of water or other healthful liquids, which will help prevent bacteria from settling on teeth. If you are taking medications that cause dry mouth, be sure to increase your fluid intake or try chewing sugarless gum.

“Even with careful brushing and flossing, some plaque will develop,” says Dr. Russell.

“At your regular cleanings, dental hygienists can remove this plaque. Your dentist will also make sure there are no signs of oral cancer, check for tooth decay and inspect for receding gums, which can signal gum disease. Therefore, it is important to schedule visits, even if you don't think you have any problems.”