



# Oral Health Messages

## TEENS 13 TO 19 YEARS OLD

A basic guide to help you care for your teenager's oral health:

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**C**ongratulations! Your child is a teenager now and on the road to taking care of their own smile. It is important to remember that cavities are not just for little kids—they can get them at any age.

A transition in personal care decision making is beginning, and it is critical that teenagers understand that their behaviors and actions can set them on a course for a healthy mouth in the years ahead.

## Good Nutrition and Oral Health

Eating healthy foods keeps your teen's teeth and body healthy. Motivate teens to choose healthy snacks, drink more water and try to limit sugar sweetened drinks like soda, sweet tea and even energy drinks. Certain foods can put your teen at risk for cavities and other oral health problems. Eating or drinking sweets with a meal can help limit the amount of time that sugar is on their teeth. Here are some tips to promote good oral health:

According to **My Plate**, a website from the USDA Center for Nutrition Policy and Promotion, a balanced diet should include:

- **Fruits and vegetables.** Half of what you eat every day should be fruits and vegetables.
- **Grains.** Make sure at least half of the grains you eat are whole grains, such as oatmeal, whole wheat bread and brown rice.
- **Dairy.** Choose low-fat or fat-free dairy foods.
- **Lean proteins.** Make lean protein choices, such as lean beef, skinless poultry and fish. Vary your protein choices to include eggs, beans, peas and legumes, too. Eat at least 8 oz. of seafood a week.

Snacking tips:

- Snacking is hard to resist but you can do your mouth a favor by watching the amount of soda, juice or other sweetened beverages you drink.
- If you want a snack, choose fruit, low-fat cheese, yogurt or raw vegetables.
- If you chew gum, make sure it's sugarless. Certain sugarless gums have earned the ADA Seal of Acceptance for helping prevent cavities by strengthening teeth. Look for the ADA Seal on the package.

- Good oral hygiene is especially important for people who wear braces. Your dentist may recommend that you avoid certain foods that interfere with braces or can accidentally bend the wires such as nuts, popcorn, hard candy, ice, and sticky foods like gum, caramels or other chewy candy.

## EATING DISORDERS

Anyone can suffer from an eating disorder. However, they are most common among teenagers and young adult women. In addition to their negative impact on health and quality of life, eating disorders also affect self-image, relationships with families and friends, and performance in school or at work. If you, or someone you know, suffers from an eating disorder, seek help. Talk to your health care provider or someone you trust.

Eating disorders can also affect oral health. Without proper nutrition, gums and other soft tissues inside the mouth may bleed easily. The glands that produce saliva may swell and individuals may experience chronic dry mouth. Frequent vomiting affects the teeth too. Strong stomach acid wears down the enamel changing the color, shape or length of the teeth and the edges of the teeth can become thin and easily break. Eating hot or cold food or drink may also become uncomfortable.

If you suffer from an eating disorder, these practices can help reduce oral health problems associated with it.

- Be meticulous about brushing and flossing your teeth.
- Immediately after throwing up, do NOT brush but rinse with baking soda to neutralize the effects of the stomach acid.
- Consult with your dentist about your specific treatment needs. See your dentist regularly.

## Oral Hygiene

**Drinking water:** Drink water throughout the day, especially between meals and snacks. Drink fluoridated water (via a community fluoridated water source) or if you prefer bottled water, drink water that contains fluoride.

**Brushing teeth:** It is important that you brush your teeth at least two times per day and always before going to bed. Don't forget to clean between your teeth at least once per day.

**Replacing Toothbrushes:** Most dentists agree that toothbrushes should be replaced every 3 months. After 3 months of normal wear, toothbrushes become less effective at removing plaque and bristles have a harder time reaching those tricky in-between spaces.

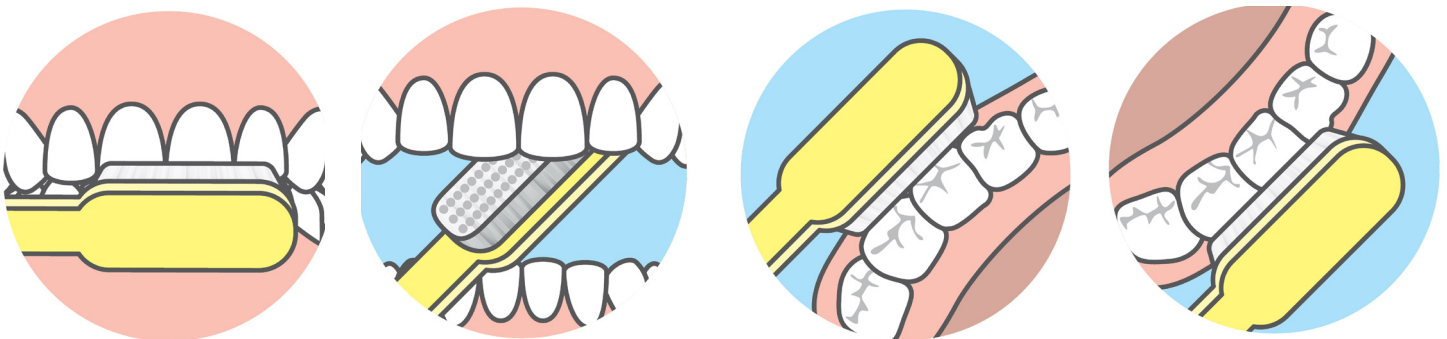
It is also important that you change your toothbrush after you have been sick with a cold or flu or a mouth infection. Bacteria can hide within the bristles and lead to reinfection.

**Storing Toothbrushes:** It is important to rinse your toothbrush very well after each use and let it dry out in an upright position. Try to keep it out from touching other toothbrushes to avoid passing germs. You can use a standard toothbrush holder with several slots. When traveling, use a plastic case to protect the bristles from damage.

**Toothpaste:** Make sure to use an ADA-accepted fluoride toothpaste.

## HOW TO BRUSH

The best way to protect your teen's teeth is to teach good dental habits from a young age. With proper coaching, you can help your teen get in the habit of brushing for two minutes twice a day which is the key to good oral hygiene and a lifetime of healthy smiles. It is especially important, if they have braces or any other jewelry or equipment in their mouth which might need extra care.



## HOW TO FLOSS

Cleaning between your teeth helps remove a sticky film called plaque. Plaque contains bacteria that feeds on leftover food or sugar in your mouth which releases an acid that eats away at the outer shell of your teeth and causes cavities.

Plaque that is not removed by brushing and cleaning between your teeth can eventually harden into a rough substance called tartar (or calculus). Tartar collects along your gum line and can lead to gum disease. Once tartar forms, only your dentist can remove it.



make them taste less sweet, but those acids also eat away at your teeth.

Water, however, cleans your mouth with every sip. It washes away leftover food and residue that cavity-causing bacteria are looking for. It also dilutes the acids produced by the bacteria in your mouth. You still need to brush and floss your teeth twice a day, however, drinking water throughout the day will go a long way toward keeping your smile cavity-free.

## Oral Health Begins at Home

Brushing and flossing are the best ways to help prevent cavities, but it's not always easy to clean every nook and cranny of your teeth—especially the back teeth called molars that are used for chewing.

Dental sealants are added protection against decay and act as a barrier to protect cavity-prone areas of the teeth. They are a plastic coating that are usually applied to the chewing surfaces of back teeth and can also be used to cover deep pits and grooves in other teeth. Sealing a tooth is fast and easy. As long as the sealant remains intact, the tooth surface will be protected from decay. Sealants hold up well under the force of normal chewing but sometimes a reapplication is needed. Talk to your dentist about sealants but remember: Even though you have sealants, you still need to brush and clean between your teeth every day.

## DRINKS

Drinking juice, soda or sports drinks may help you wash down your dinner, but they can also leave behind unwanted sugar on your teeth. The cavity-causing bacteria in your mouth love to eat sugar and produce an acid that wears away enamel, the outer shell of your teeth. Many sugar-sweetened drinks also have added acids (phosphoric, citrus or malic acid) to

Sweetened drinks that are high in sugar and calories create a perfect storm that puts you at risk for cavities and other unhealthy consequences like weight gain. In fact, studies have shown that drinking water can actually help you lose weight. So the next time you need a drink, go guilt-free with water to take care of your body and your smile.

## SUBSTANCE USE

**Smoking:** It should be no surprise that all forms of tobacco are also harmful to your oral health. In addition to bad breath, the oral health impact of smoking includes:

- stained teeth and tongue
- dulled sense of taste and smell
- slow healing after a tooth extraction or oral surgery
- difficulties in correcting cosmetic dental problems
- gum disease and tooth loss
- oral cancer

**Meth Mouth:** This term describes damage that the use of the illegal and highly addictive drug methamphetamine can have on users' oral health. A potent central nervous system stimulant, methamphetamine, causes a variety of health problems including rampant tooth decay. Some users describe their teeth as "blackened, stained, rotting, crumbling or falling apart." Often, the teeth cannot be salvaged and must be removed.



## Going to the Dentist

Regular dental visits can prevent many dental health problems from developing and intervene early in other problems while treatment is likely to be simpler and more affordable. Regular visits help your teen to be comfortable at the dentist's office into young adulthood. Furthermore, other diseases or medical conditions have symptoms that can appear in the mouth.

### DURING THE VISIT

The dentist or hygienist will ask about your recent medical history, examine your mouth and decide whether or not you need x-rays. Depending on your treatment plan, the hygienist may use a special dental instrument to check your gums for gum disease. Your dentist will evaluate your overall dental health and conduct an oral cancer screening by holding your tongue with gauze, checking it and your whole mouth, then feeling your jaw and neck.

**Braces:** If you have an overbite, an underbite or your teeth are crooked or out of alignment, you may benefit from braces. Not only can braces improve your smile and straighten your teeth, they can also improve your dental health and overall health because untreated orthodontic problems can make it hard to bite and chew and can interfere with eating. You may also be prone to cavities or gum disease because it may be hard to clean your teeth. Braces come in many different styles, including tooth-colored plastic braces or traditional metal braces in a variety of colors. Removable clear retainers can sometimes be used. Talk to your dentist to see what the best choice is for you.

**Wisdom teeth:** The majority of people have most of their permanent teeth by age 13. Wisdom teeth, also referred to as third molars, are the last teeth to come in during young adulthood (typically between the ages of 17-21), the time of life when you gain maturity or "wisdom." Sometimes there is not enough room for the wisdom teeth to come in straight and they may come in crooked or sideways. When that happens, your dentist may say they are "impacted" and recommend that they be removed. Because teeth develop differently, visit your dentist regularly so he/she can monitor the progress of your wisdom teeth. Every patient is unique, but in general, wisdom teeth may need to be removed when there is evidence of:



- pain
- infection
- cysts
- tumors
- damage to adjacent teeth
- gum disease
- tooth decay (if it is not possible or desirable to restore the tooth)

Your dentist or specialist may also recommend removing your wisdom teeth to prevent problems or when removal is part of getting braces, treating gum disease or for other dental procedures.

**Mouth Jewelry:** Oral piercings or tongue splitting can be dangerous to your health through infection and swelling. Because your mouth contains millions of bacteria, your mouth and tongue could swell and close your airway. Choking on broken jewelry is another potential hazard. Repeated clicking of the jewelry against teeth can cause damage and/or could crack a tooth. Infected oral piercings in the mouth can also lead to more serious systemic infections such as hepatitis or endocarditis.

## Paying for Your Teen's Oral Health Care

In California, all children 0 to 19 years old, regardless of their immigration status, qualify for Medi-Cal if their parents' income is considered as low income. Under Medi-Cal, all children receive Denti-Cal which covers most of their dental care services.

Kaiser Permanente Community Health Plan also offers health and dental coverage for uninsured children 0-19, regardless of their immigration status, whose parents' income is a little higher than that required by Medi-Cal. Unfortunately, this program is not offered in all counties of California.

## What Does Your Dental Plan Cover?

In California, all medical plans include pediatric dental benefits. Your child will always have access to dental coverage through a medical plan and you will have the option to purchase additional coverage through a stand-alone plan.

Once you've determined what your child's dental needs are, you can work with your child's dentist and benefits provider to determine what is covered. Often, your child's dentist's office will look into this information for you. Most plans cover preventive care.

You can also call your child's plan using the member service telephone number (800) on your identification card, or go to their website for information.

## Choosing the Best Dental Home for Your Teenager's Needs

If you are looking for a new dentist, search for someone who will do more than just clean your teen's teeth. Dental health is such a vital part of overall health that it is important for every patient to have a dental home.

A dental home allows you to feel comfortable whether it is a routine check up, a new procedure or a dental emergency. Here's how to find the best dental fit for you and your family.

### START WITH THE BASICS

Regular visits are key to a healthy smile, so start with the details that work best with your lifestyle and dental care needs. Some things to consider include:

- Is the office easy for your teen to get to from school or on their own?
- Do they have convenient office hours?
- If you have dental benefits, is this dentist in your network?
- Doctor-patient communication is very important. Do you, or your teen, need translation or interpreter services?
- Is the dentist a member of the ADA?

To find the right dentist, do not be shy about calling or visiting the dentists on your list before deciding, here are some few questions you might want to ask:

- Will the dentist explain ways to help you prevent dental health problems? Is dental health instruction provided?
- How does the dentist and office staff handle emergencies outside of office hours?
- Is the office staff familiar with your benefit plan, and do they offer financial options for treatment costs?
- Will your medical and dental history be recorded and placed in a permanent file?

**“Look for a dentist who can be a coach to motivate you, a trusted advisor to turn to when health issues arise and a partner to make dental care decisions with.”**

**—DR. TAYLOR-OSBORNE.**