


Taking a Bite Out of Oral Health

By Shelley Herron | June 27, 2019

The number of dental products lining the shelves in drug and retail stores has ballooned in recent years. What should we consider when sorting through the options? Start with the basics, advises Alex Luli, PharmD, assistant clinical professor in the Skaggs School of Pharmacy and Pharmaceutical Sciences at UC San Diego.

“The most important thing is to regularly brush and floss your teeth and get routine dental care. These are the most important ways to disrupt plaque formation — the bacteria that produce acids and demineralize the teeth.”

Beyond that, many products can offer extra help in the fight against plaque and other oral hygiene issues. Here’s Luli’s advice to consumers: Choose products with the [American Dental Association \(ADA\) Seal of Acceptance](#)  whenever possible. Every product with the ADA seal has been evaluated by independent experts to be safe and effective.

Toothbrushes

- → The advantages of manual versus powered brushes depend on personal preference. A powered brush can be especially beneficial for people with challenges holding or using a manual brush.
- → An oral irrigator, also known as a water flosser, can be helpful when you can’t reach areas with a brush, such as when wearing a dental appliance.

Toothpastes

- → Toothpaste provides an extra benefit in fighting tooth and gum decay, especially if it contains fluoride. Most products have similar efficacy so if in doubt, check for the ADA seal.
- → Teeth whitening agents are now common in toothpaste. These are popular and generally safe, but can cause tooth sensitivity. Ask your dentist if whitening is appropriate for you. Don’t use in excess because you want more of a good thing.
- → Foaming agents in toothpaste such as sodium lauryl sulfate can help with cleaning, but people predisposed to canker sores should avoid them as they can actually cause sores. Other toothpastes are available without sodium lauryl sulfate.

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ood rule of thumb is to use an amount of toothpaste the size of a grain of rice for kids under age 3 and a pea-sized amount for those ages 3 to 6.

Rinses/Mouthwash

- → These can be a good adjunct to brushing and flossing. Some have fluoride to help prevent cavities, which is especially helpful if you don't have fluoride in your water supply.
- → Rinses can be alcohol or non-alcohol based. If you want the refreshing (stinging) action, choose an alcohol-based product. You'll find it listed under inactive ingredients on label. Alcohol-based products should be avoided when undergoing chemotherapy or if you have mouth sores. And of course, people shouldn't swallow it, especially children.
- → Mouth rinses are good for freshening breath, but may also disguise serious underlying conditions that can cause bad breath, such as periodontal disease or an infection in the mouth.

Special Conditions

Saliva helps prevent gum disease, tooth decay and other oral infections. Cancer treatment, such as radiation therapy, can damage salivary glands and cause dry mouth. Saliva substitutes have enzymes that mimic saliva. Older patients or people using certain medications might also have dry mouth and can benefit from these products, which can also be found in the form of sprays, rinses, gels and lozenges.

Cold versus Canker Sores

A canker sore is a lesion in the mouth that typically goes away in approximately two weeks. The exact cause or causes of canker sores is unknown, but suspected risk factors include stress, trauma (bite) or a virus. Spicy or acidic foods can make them worse. Topical oral protectants form a barrier over the sore to provide temporary relief. Some products also contain peroxide to keep the area clean.

Cold sores are triggered by stress, sun exposure and temperature changes. They can appear anywhere around the mouth, inside or out and are contagious. Over-the-counter remedies include topical skin protectants and Abreva cream, which contains docosanol and may reduce duration of symptoms.

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