

Benefits Spotlight

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Dental Exams: The Cleaning Only Scratches the Surface

It happens to the best of us: Life gets busy, so you put off scheduling your dental visit because you think it's just a cleaning.

Dental hygiene visits are sometimes called dental cleanings, but that minimizes their importance. Yes, there's a deep cleaning component but it's also about prevention. Your oral health is a reflection—and sometimes a predictor—of your overall health. For example, gum disease could be a warning sign of diabetes. Seeing your dentist twice a year ensures your dentist catches any problems early. That means less invasive and costly treatment for you.

So, what happens during your dental hygiene visits? Let's take a closer look.

Yes, there's a deep cleaning.

Let's start with the obvious component: the deep clean. Even the most diligent brushers and flossers can't match the clean a dental hygienist can provide. Your hygienist will remove plaque, floss between each tooth, and finish with a polish that will leave your mouth feeling cleaner than anything you can get at home.

But there's also a cancer screening.

Your dentist will perform an oral cancer screening by feeling inside of your mouth for any abnormal lumps or sores. Your dentist may also check the outside of your face and neck.

Your gums will be under a microscope.

Well, actually, it's a mirror. Your dental hygienist will examine your gum health with a small mirror to identify any early stages of gum disease (like bleeding or inflamed gums). Getting gum disease under control early is important, as it's linked to chronic issues like heart disease and diabetes.

If you have x-rays, many unseen issues will come to light.

X-rays can see problems in their earliest forms, like tiny cavities. It can also show your dentist issues lurking below your gum line, such as bone loss in your jaw. When these problems are identified early, they can be treated effectively and at lower cost. Left untreated, these dental problems can cause more damage, be harder to treat and cost more for you.

You'll ensure your teeth are structurally sound.

Your dental hygienist will check for areas of “weak” teeth—that is, teeth that move and are loose. Your hygienist will also ensure that any fillings are still intact (that is, no cracks or damage).

An “open wide” can be eye-opening.

Your dentist may ask you to open your mouth wide then close. This simple movement helps your dentist evaluate your bite and jaw function. If your bite is not aligned correctly, it may cause facial pain. Fortunately, your dentist can help treat this problem.

You leave with a customized plan for better home care.

Your dentist and dental hygienist have gotten an up-close look at your mouth, so they can help you to take better care of it at home. They may recommend a different type of toothbrush or toothpaste based on your dental needs and lifestyle. Struggling with flossing? Your dentist and hygienist can share strategies to make it easier for you.

As you can see, your dental visits are far more than just a cleaning. When you're finished with each appointment, schedule your next one before you leave the office. The deep cleaning is important, but seeing your dentist twice a year is more than that—it's an essential part of practicing preventive oral and overall health.

Sources

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Readers Ask, Dr. Jeff Answers: 4 Healthy Snacks for Dental Health

“Hi, Dr. Jeff—It's important to me that my kids have healthy snacks, but it seems like the definition of healthy changes by the day. What are some nutritious, teeth-friendly and tasty snacks that I can feel good giving my kids?”

This is a great question, because smart snacking is tough. Many people associate snacks with empty calories and zapped mealtime appetites. But when done the right way, snacks can keep energy levels stable and help you sneak in healthful dental nutrients throughout the day.

But you're right: It's hard to know the right way to snack when the notion of what's healthy isn't as clear as it used to be. A good example of this is the use of “real fruit juice” in gummy fruit snacks. Real fruit juice may make you think this is a good choice, but chewy munchies stay on your teeth longer. That's why I recommend that parents avoid giving their kids sticky snacks.

Fresh, whole foods will always be in style when snacking with oral health in mind. Below are four great options to share with your kids:

- **String cheese** is a kid favorite for the taste, and you can feel good about it for the calcium it provides.

- **Raw veggies** will always be among my top picks, and you can make them more appealing to kids by serving them in sticks (think carrots and celery) and slices (bell peppers are a good choice). Pairing the veggies with healthful dips like hummus, guacamole or almond butter add great flavor and additional nutrients.
- **Fresh fruit** is an excellent option, particularly apples (which stimulate saliva production to clear away food and bacteria) and strawberries (which are packed with vitamin C for gum health). To add an even bigger nutrient boost, you can make a fresh or frozen fruit smoothie with yogurt and milk (teeth love the extra calcium).
- **Nuts** are filled with nutrients and protein—no empty calories here! Almonds are a particularly good pick for oral health, as they’re low in sugar and contain calcium.

“Good” foods and “bad” foods come and go, but these four snacks combine a great mix of taste and oral health nutrients that weather changing trends. Remember, whole foods will always be good choices for your kids—and introducing your kids to these nutrient-packed options is setting them up for a lifetime of nutritious eating and good oral health.

Dr. Jeffrey Chaffin is the Dental Director for Delta Dental of Iowa. Have a question you'd like Dr. Jeff to answer? Send it his way at healthy@delatadentalia.com, and it could be featured in an upcoming issue!

Sources

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