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Returning to good health care can start with a smile

Even without becoming sick from COVID-19 infection, many people let some of their daily routines slip during the pandemic, including making time for physical activity, healthy sleep patterns, and maintenance of mental health, leading to anxiety and depression.¹ Making sure to take care of your oral health may be a way to jump-start getting back into daily routines that may benefit your overall physical and mental well-being.

ROUTINE HOME CARE

Here are some things you can do at home to protect your oral health.

Brushing and cleaning between your teeth

The American Dental Association (ADA) recommends brushing teeth twice per day with a fluoride toothpaste. During the pandemic, many people dropped back to brushing only once per day.²

Brushing and cleaning between the teeth is important because it helps remove the plaque that builds up on teeth. Plaque is a film of bacteria that causes cavities and gum disease. In addition to brushing twice per day, you should clean between your teeth daily. There are many types of products you can use for this, including floss, floss holders, water flossers, and brushes or sticks designed for this purpose.

Maintaining a healthy diet, low in sugar

Snacking on foods and drinks high in sugar increased during the pandemic.² Limiting the amount of sugar in the diet is important for oral health because the bacteria in plaque change sugar into an acid that causes cavities. The ADA recommends limiting sugary or sticky snacks or drinks in your diet.

Avoiding tobacco

One study showed that 1 of 4 tobacco users smoked more during the pandemic.³ Tobacco use can not only cause staining of the teeth and increase the risk of gum disease, but it is also a cause of cancer in the mouth and throat. For these reasons, the ADA recommends that you avoid all tobacco products.

ROUTINE PROFESSIONAL DENTAL CARE

At the beginning of the pandemic, most dental offices limited their patient visits to emergencies, but now most offices are open to all patients. During regular visits, your dentist can check for signs of oral diseases and provide professional cleanings and treatments to help prevent cavities.

Examinations

A dental examination can reveal signs of cavities, gum disease, and oral cancer. Your dentist also can talk with you about ways to quit using tobacco and improve your diet.

Cleanings

Professional cleanings remove plaque and calculus along and beneath the gumline. Calculus forms on the teeth as plaque hardens and can no longer be brushed away. Calculus typically requires professional removal, which will help prevent its future formation and irritation of the gums.

Cavity prevention

Cavities increased among children during the pandemic.² Dentists can help reduce the risk of cavities using sealants and fluoride treatments. Sealants are most often used in children to protect the chewing surfaces of the back teeth (molars). A sealant is a liquid that is painted on the molar; it hardens into a smooth surface that helps prevent food and plaque from getting trapped in the pits and grooves of those teeth.

Fluoride in your daily toothpaste and in professional treatments helps harden your teeth and protect them from cavities. Professional fluoride treatments can come in the form of a foam, gel, or paint-on varnish.

CONCLUSION

The COVID-19 pandemic took a toll on many people's physical and mental health, especially in terms of maintaining healthy habits and lifestyle. Now is the time to take charge of your daily routine, including your oral health care habits at home and regular visits to your dentist. ■

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"For the Patient" provides general information on dental treatments. It is designed to prompt discussion between dentist and patient about treatment options and does not substitute for the dentist's professional assessment based on the individual patient's needs and desires.

You can find more information for patients at ADAcatalog.org or at MouthHealthy.org.

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