



HEALTHY AT HOME

7 Ways to Save Your Smile from Stress

Last year was crushing (literally) for our teeth, according to a survey of dentists. Here are unexpected tips to relax and preserve your pearly whites.

BY BETH WEINHOUSE

THE PANDEMIC HAS affected nearly every aspect of our lives—and our oral health is no exception. In a September 2020 survey by the American Dental Association, more than half of dentists reported higher cases of bruxism (teeth grinding and clenching), chipped and cracked teeth, and temporomandibular joint disorder (TMD) symptoms, like jaw pain; more than a quarter reported a rise in cavities and gum disease.

“In general, humans clench and grind as a response to stress,” says Tammy Chen, DDS, a prosthodontist in New York City. “During stressful times, people tend to turn to unhealthy habits—more sugar indulgence, less sleep, more smoking and drinking,” adds Jared Cox, DDS, a dentist in Searcy, Arkansas. The effects of those habits on our oral health are damaging—and can take months, even years, to reveal themselves. Worse, many studies link poor oral health to poor heart health.

But the latest news may have you smiling soon enough: Spring is imminent, and coronavirus vaccines are on the way. To make sure your smile is still dazzling when your mask comes off, follow these crucial oral care steps.

1

Do Mouth Stretches

You may grit your teeth to steel yourself for difficult situations, but that approach isn't doing your mouth any favors. In fact, your top and bottom teeth should never touch, except when you chew, Chen says. Try the following exercises to counteract the habit. If you're still in pain or waking up with a sore jaw or facial aches, talk to your dentist. You may need to get a night guard to reduce the effects of bruxism while you sleep or be tested for sleep apnea.

TO EASE PAIN: Put a pencil in it. "If you have a lot of pain in your jaw, or a spasm, lightly hold a pencil horizontally in your front teeth to deprogram the muscles. Hold it for at least 20 minutes," says Sandra Cove, DMD, a dentist in Ashland, Massachusetts.

TO STRENGTHEN YOUR JAW AND PREVENT PAIN: Resist. Place a thumb under your chin and open your mouth, pushing against your thumb. Hold your mouth open for five seconds. Then press your fingers against your chin to resist your mouth closing.

TO RELAX: Breathe before bedtime. Close your eyes, press your tongue against the roof of your mouth, and breathe deeply through your nose for several minutes. This stimulates an antistress response to help you sleep without grinding.

2

Brighten Up a Broken Routine

"Everyone's daily life has a rhythm to it, and the pandemic has altered that rhythm," says Matthew J. Messina, DDS, an assistant professor at the Ohio State University's College of Dentistry. "It's easy to forget to brush and floss." Neglecting oral hygiene creates a constant, low-grade drag on the body's immune system and can lead to bacterial infections and gum disease. Concentrate on what Messina calls the "healthy four": Brush twice a day (after breakfast and before bed) with a fluoride toothpaste, floss once a day, eat a healthy diet, and see your dentist regularly. "In a time when so many things in the world seem out of control, your personal hygiene is something you can control," he says.



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3

Invest in a Good Chair

If you've left an office job to work from home, it's tempting to spend part of your workday on the couch with your computer on your lap. But sitting like that—shoulders hunched, head forward—can be a hidden cause of mouth pain. "That posture can cause muscle stress not only in the shoulders but also in the head and neck muscles we chew with," Messina says.

That's why an ergonomic desk chair, of all things, is a surprising protector of oral health. Find one that supports your back and encourages good posture so you hold your head straight. "Check that your computer is at eye level or slightly above," Chen says. "If you're looking down, you'll feel the weight of your head."

4

Combat "Mask Mouth"

Some people breathe through their mouth when wearing a mask, which quickly leads to dry mouth. "Bacteria can have a party in a dry mouth," Chen says. "It's one of the biggest predictors of cavities and

gum disease.” To retrain yourself to breathe through your nose, she recommends putting a little piece of tape over your mouth, especially if you’ll be wearing your mask for a while, like when you’re at work.

If you have severe dry mouth (common in people who wear N95 masks, which are generally reserved for health care workers), Cove recommends that you chew or suck on sugar-free gum or mints containing xylitol while you wear a mask. That will increase saliva production, and xylitol helps fight cavities, she says. Also, make sure you stay hydrated—it can be harder to remember to drink water when you’re wearing a mask.

5

Snack Faster

If you’ve been indulging in comfort foods to soothe the stress of the past year, welcome to the club. But be aware that frequent snacking, especially on sugary or acidic foods, increases the risk of tooth decay. “Seconds after you eat or drink something sweet, the pH in your mouth drops to 5.5. That’s cavity mode, and it stays that way for 20 minutes,” Cove says. So if you nibble a cookie or eat a handful of raisins, walk away, and come back every 20 minutes for more, you leave your mouth constantly susceptible. To protect your teeth, have your treat all at once, then rinse your mouth with water (or if possible, brush your teeth) right afterward.

6

Choose Meditation over Merlot

“Alcohol consumption has gone up,” Cove says. “And alcohol has high, high sugar.” Alcohol may also lead to dry mouth, which alters bacterial content and can make cavities more likely. Plus, of course, red wine can stain your teeth. Instead of always reaching for a glass when you need to relax, try simple breathing techniques (like the bedtime exercise on page 40) or short meditations.

7

Reacquaint Yourself with Your Dentist

If you haven’t seen your dentist in the last year, make an appointment. Preventive care helps stave off periodontal disease, which has been linked to a host of poor heart health outcomes, including stroke, narrowed arteries, and high blood pressure. If fears of Covid-19 have delayed you, remember that dentists routinely—and safely—care for people with serious viruses, such as the flu and hepatitis C, and they customarily use HEPA filters, PPE, and lots of disinfectant.

Not getting the care you need has other risks too. “Deferred care becomes critical care,” Messina says. In other words, a small cavity gets bigger and requires a root canal or a crown instead of a filling. That’s why prevention saves you money in the long run, Messina adds: “The cheapest cavity is the one you never get.” ■