

Benefits Spotlight

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Give Your Gums Some Love: 4 Ways to Keep Gums Healthy

When it comes to dental health, many people's first concern is their teeth. Do I have cavities? Should I straighten my teeth? What whitening product is best? But when was the last time you thought about what is holding those teeth in place—your gums?

Gum health is important. People who have advanced stages of gum disease may need to have their teeth removed. And gum disease has been linked to other chronic conditions, such as diabetes and heart disease.

Although you might not feel pain if your gums are unhealthy, gums typically show signs of disease. Healthy gums are pink and firm, whereas unhealthy gums appear to pull away from your teeth, are red and swollen, and often bleed when flossed.

Fortunately, gum disease is preventable and, in some cases, reversible. Below are four easy ways to preserve your gum health.

- 1. Build your at-home gum health kit:** Keeping (and using!) a few drugstore products will keep your gums healthy between dental visits. Pack your kit with:
 - **Floss:** Floss removes plaque and food that your toothbrush can't reach. Aim to gently floss between your teeth and along the gumline at least once per day.
 - **Electric toothbrush:** Electric toothbrushes more effectively remove gum disease-causing plaque better than their manual counterparts. Twice daily, brush both your teeth and gums to remove food and plaque. And remember, don't scrub your teeth and gums harshly—use gentle strokes to avoid doing more harm than good.
 - **Fluoride toothpaste:** Choose a toothpaste that contains fluoride, which helps prevent tooth decay.
 - **Mouthwash:** Dental mouthwashes can help prevent gum disease and clean your mouth by removing plaque and bacteria. Many mouthwashes are available today, and your dentist can share a recommendation with you.
- 2. Keep twice-yearly dental appointments:** Your twice-yearly dental visits allow your dentist to catch any oral health problems—like gum disease—early. If your dentist detects signs of gum problems, he or she will share ways you can take care of your gums between visits to reverse the damage. You'll also receive a thorough cleaning at the visit to remove any tartar from around your gums (hardened plaque).

- 3. Eat for gum health:** The bacteria that forms the plaque that leads to gum disease thrives on sugary and starchy foods. Avoiding foods like candy, soda and even pasta and rice may help stave off bacteria production in your mouth. Instead, fill your plate with high-nutrient fruits and vegetables, calcium-rich dairy, healthy fats (like olive oil) and lean protein sources like chicken and fish. Your mouth needs a range of vitamins and nutrients just like the rest of your body, so a healthful diet will curb your risk for a range of diseases, including gum disease.
- 4. Kick your tobacco habit:** If you smoke cigarettes or chew tobacco, you should stop. Tobacco has been proven to cause gum disease, so talk to your dentist or doctor about resources that can help you quit.

Remember, gum disease is reversible. It's not too late to protect your gum health, oral health and overall health with these four simple tips.

SOURCES

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Are Vegan Diets Harmful to Oral Health?

If you've taken a close look at the meat or dairy aisles in your local grocery store lately, you've probably noticed products you didn't see just a year or two ago. Gone are the days when cow's milk was all you could find lining dairy shelves, and the meat aisle is now brimming with a wide variety of plant-based substitutes. The demand is clear: People are turning to more plant-based diets, like vegetarianism and veganism, for animal welfare, environmental and health reasons.

While vegetarians shun only meat, vegans eliminate all animal products from their diets—and that includes dairy. In the U.S., anywhere from 1-2% of the total population identifies as vegan.¹

Dairy products contain several nutrients that are helpful to your oral health. When you eliminate dairy, it's important to consider how to replenish those nutrients through plant-based sources. According to the American Dietetic Association, nearly anyone can live a healthy life without meat, but giving up traditional animal-based sources of nutrients can increase the risk for gum disease.

Among the nutrients of greatest focus are calcium and vitamin D. Dairy products are among the most concentrated sources of calcium, a nutrient that keeps your bones, including your teeth, healthy and strong.

Dairy aside, vegans have many ways to get healthy amounts of calcium in their diets through broccoli, leafy greens and soybeans. Of course, taking a daily calcium supplement will help, too.

Vitamin D is typically found in fatty fish (like salmon), cheese and cow's milk—all of which are off the menu for vegans. Fortunately, vitamin D may be found in fortified plant-based cereals and beverages. Vitamin D supplements will also help boost the nutrient in the vegan diet. Plus, sunlight is a completely vegan source of vitamin D, too.

Veganism may be a healthy lifestyle choice for you, but when starting this or any major diet change, it's important to seek the advice of professionals to ensure it's the best move for you. Your doctor and dentist are great people to ask when considering veganism. Your doctor may also refer you to a dietitian, who can provide more detailed information on specific meal plans to help you gain the most benefit from a vegan diet.

Bottom line: Like any diet, balance and variety are keys to success when it comes to veganism. A well-balanced vegan diet rich in a variety of nutrients, including calcium and vitamin D, can help support your oral health.

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