Keep your mouth in tiptop shape with our expert tips

By Heather Hatfield, WebMD Contributing Writer

Brushing, flossing, and rinsing are the ABCs of oral health, but they’re only the beginning. A marvelous mouth takes more than squeezing paste out of a tube—think improving your toothbrushing technique, ditching the daily soda habit, and saying goodbye to cigarettes.

David L. Leader, DMD, an assistant clinical professor at Tufts University School of Dental Medicine in Boston, outlines eight oral care musts for a healthy mouth.

1. Pay a visit. If you’re prone to ditching the dentist, you’re among the roughly 50% of adults in the United States who don’t see a dentist yearly because of dental phobia, finances, or just plain neglect. But spend some quality time with your dentist (twice a year, the American Dental Association advises), and you’ll catch problems such as decay, gum disease, trauma, or cancer at an early stage when they’re treatable, not to mention more affordable to take care of.

2. Count the years. Toddlers and older adults tend to fly under the dental health radar, but they need mouth maintenance just like the rest of us. Children should see a dentist by the time they’re 1, and until they are coordinated
enough to tie their own shoes, they’ll need help cleaning their teeth. Older folks have their own oral issues. Arthritis can make brushing and flossing challenging, and as people age, the amount of saliva they produce decreases, which means more tooth decay and also discomfort for those who wear dentures.

Can the soda? Fizzy is fun but also part of the reason soda is so bad for your teeth. Two ingredients—phosphoric acid and citric acid—give soda its “bite” but also eat away at the surface of your teeth. While the occasional soda won’t hurt, a can or more a day makes your tooth enamel softer and more susceptible to cavities. Switch to water instead, adding flavor with sliced citrus or crushed berries or mint leaves.

Don’t sugarcoat it. Sugar is a major culprit in tooth decay. It fuels bacteria and acidity in your mouth, causing plaque to form and eat away at your enamel and gums. Your pearly whites are hit with up to 20 minutes of acid production for every sugar fest you indulge in, from sweetened coffee in the morning to soda its “bite” but also eat away at the surface of your teeth. While the occasional soda won’t hurt, a can or more a day makes your tooth enamel softer and more susceptible to cavities. Switch to water instead, adding flavor with sliced citrus or crushed berries or mint leaves.

Pack it in. You’ve heard it before: Quit smoking. But this time, it’s your dentist talking. The nicotine and tobacco chemicals can lead to oral cancer. Your risk of tooth loss. Even worse, supports teeth, and, eventually, increases enamel and gums. Your pearly whites are susceptible to cavities. Switch to water instead, adding flavor with sliced citrus or crushed berries or mint leaves.

Finesse flossing. It’s simple: Flossing fosters healthier teeth and gums. But like brushing, there’s a right and wrong way because flaws in your flossing can cause friction and damage the gum line. Wrap about a foot of floss around your index fingers, keeping about two inches between your fingers to work with. Unroll a fresh section of floss for each tooth, and keep the floss tight against the tooth to break up plaque while leaving your gums in good shape.

Avoid being among the 20% of people who face tooth decay. Cut down on sugary treats, and aim to brush and floss after every meal.

SMART MOUTH

What’s gingivitis? Do at-home whitening treatments really work? How to cope with your fear of the dentist? Get the scoop on all this and more at WebMD’s Oral Health center.

Tiny Teeth

What’s the right age for a visit to the dentist?

Q ► How old should my child be before I make his first dental appointment?

A ► You should take him in by the time he celebrates his first birthday.

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Ask the experts: Your questions answered

Can I change the shape of my teeth?

Yes. You can choose from among several dental procedures.

Dental bonding is a procedure in which your dentist applies a tooth-colored resin to the tooth surface, which hardens with a special light that bonds the material to the tooth. Bonding can fill gaps between teeth, repair small chips, and smooth out rough edges. Dental crowns are tooth-shaped “caps” placed over teeth. Cemented into place, crowns encase the entire visible portion of a tooth. Crowns are made of porcelain or porcelain fused to metal and restore the tooth’s natural shape, contour, and appearance.

Veneers are wafer-thin, custom-made shells of tooth-colored materials, either porcelain or resin that are bonded to the front surface of teeth. Recontouring or reshaping removes small amounts of tooth enamel to change a tooth’s length, shape, or surface.

These options differ in terms of cost, durability, and “chair time.” Talk to your dentist to see what’s right for you.

DID YOU KNOW?

WebMD also provides tips and tools to keep your pet healthy!

INSIDE

Healthy Pets

For Dog Lovers

For Cat Lovers

Get expert answers to all your oral health questions.
Anna Kendrick is quick to grin—in fact, her winsome smile just might be her signature feature. Yet just a few years ago, when she first became a household name after a knockout, Academy Award-nominated performance in Up in the Air opposite George Clooney, her beam was a bit of an act. “I try so hard to keep smiling, and to deal with everything publicly,” she told talk show host Ellen DeGeneres in early 2010, right as her career was hitting hyper-drive. “But my poor friends and family are dealing with my meltdowns on a daily basis.” Kendrick says she felt overwhelmed by the media attention and the transition from life as a working actor who’d labored for years on Broadway and in smaller parts to bona fide celebrity. “It feels funny to complain about that end of it,” she says now. “So I won’t do that. But it does put you in a very vulnerable place.”

Two years later, after critical praise for her work in Seth Rogen’s 2011 cancer dramedy 50/50 and with the much-buzzed-about What to Expect When You’re Expecting due for delivery in May, Kendrick says her inner and outer selves have finally aligned. But that’s not because the media juggernaut has become any easier. “I enjoy being on set—much more than getting caught up in the promotional end,” she says. “I am a lot more comfortable in my skin now, mostly because I did six films last year, and I spent more of my time doing the actual work, which is what I really enjoy.”

Kendrick, 26, always wanted to be an actor, even as a preteen growing up in Portland, Maine. Her parents helped make that happen, packing Kendrick and her older brother onto a Greyhound bus to New York City so they could audition for—and win—coveted roles. (Her first acting gig was at 12, playing Dinah in the Broadway musical High Society.) “We had to promise up and down we’d go straight to the audition and then turn around and come straight home, she laughs. She’s doing less auditioning nowadays as acting roles continue to roll in. In What to Expect—a film co-starring Jennifer Lopez, Cameron Diaz, Elizabeth Banks, and Chris Rock—Kendrick plays a gourmet food truck vendor who hooks up with a fellow rising chef, played by Gossip Girl’s Chace Crawford. After the “meet cute,” the fledgling duo find themselves, to their great shock, pregnant. How did Kendrick prepare? “I did some research with a chef,” she says, “and cut my fingers so many times in the process! But I felt weird about going up to random women and asking if they’d ever had an unexpected pregnancy, and what that felt like. For part of the shoot I did wear a pregnancy prosthetic, and I was most surprised about how many people came up and just started poking at my stomach. They’d just poke it! And so many women on the set would see me [wearing] it and immediately start telling me about their own experiences being pregnant. There was something about the stomach itself that made women want to talk.”

Kendrick says she’s “nowhere close to being enough of a grown-up” to consider motherhood, although she’s not ruling it out down the line. She’s glad she’s been able to first pursue her dream. In fact, Kendrick’s mother paved the way by setting a good example. “I grew up with a working mom,” Kendrick says. “So that was always normal to me. But I remember one time a neighbor who was a stay-at-home mom came over and criti- cized my mother for making one big batch of pancakes and then freezing what was left so we could take them out and eat them all week. And my dad overheard her, and he just let her have it! Why do moms do that to each other? Because you know what? We loved those pancakes! We did.”

3 THINGS THAT MAKE ANNA SMILE

1. “Seeing people’s home renovations in Dwell magazine. What they’ve done to their homes, I always think it’s so sweet—and cooler than anything I can manage.”
2. “Dog-sitting! I don’t have one yet, so I will dog-sit for basically anybody.”
3. “My mom makes jewelry, and sometimes she sends me something in the mail out of nowhere.”

Reviewed by
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