



Your oral & dental health > A-Z oral health information

## My teeth

### What are my teeth for?

Your teeth do different jobs. They help you to cut up and chew your food when you are eating. They help you to talk and make different sounds. They also give your face its shape and give you a nice smile.



You have four different types of teeth:

- The incisors are the teeth at the very front of your mouth. They are the sharpest and help to cut up your food.
- The canines are the pointed teeth either side of your incisors. They help to hold and tear the food.
- The pre-molars are behind your canine teeth. They have a flat chewing surface because they help to crush your food.
- The molars are the very back teeth. They are big 'double' teeth and are also flat. They help to chew and grind your food into small pieces ready to swallow.

### What are the different parts of my teeth?

Your teeth are fixed to your jawbone in your mouth. They sit in a curved line along your top and bottom jaws. The white part of your tooth that you can see when you smile or open your mouth is called the crown. Some of your tooth is hidden under the skin (gum) in your mouth. This is called the root and you cannot see this in your mouth. The white covering on your tooth is called enamel. Dental enamel is strong and helps to protect the tooth. Dental enamel is the hardest thing in your whole body.

### When will I get all my teeth?

Your first set of baby teeth would have appeared through your gums when you were about six months old. You should have had twenty teeth by the time you were about two-and-a-half years old. These teeth began to fall out when you were about six years old to make way for your adult (permanent) teeth.

All your adult teeth should be in your mouth by the time you are about thirteen. You should have twenty-eight adult teeth. When you are between eighteen and twenty-five you may also start to get four more back teeth, at the top and bottom. These are called your **wisdom teeth**, as people used to think that you got them when you had knowledge and became wise. This makes the total number of teeth you will have in your mouth thirty-two.

It is important to look after your adult teeth, as you will not get any more. As soon as your teeth appear in your mouth you could get **tooth decay** if you do not look after them properly.

### What are plaque and tooth decay?

Plaque is a creamy, sticky coating of germs (bacteria) that collects on everybody's teeth every day. The germs won't harm you, but they can harm your teeth. Tooth decay is caused by acid from the bacteria (plaque acids), which can cause a hole (cavity) in the enamel of your tooth. Tooth decay may make your tooth ache. If this happens you need to see a dentist, who may have to clean the hole and put a filling in the tooth to repair it.

### What are the best foods and drinks to keep my teeth healthy?

The main cause of tooth decay is the sugar that is in the food and drinks you have. Every time you eat or drink anything sugary your teeth are under attack from the plaque acids for up to one hour. This is because the sugar mixes with the bacteria in the plaque to produce the harmful plaque acids.

That is why it is important to have sugary foods and drinks just at mealtimes. If you are hungry between meals, you should choose foods that are kind to your teeth and do not have added sugar.

Here are some foods that will not cause acid attacks on your teeth: fresh fruit, raw vegetable pieces, plain popcorn, cheese, breadsticks, plain yoghurt, rice cakes, unsweetened cereal, crumpets, plain bagels, cheese scones and nuts.

When you are thirsty, plain water and plain milk are the best drinks for your teeth. If you drink fruit juices you should have them at mealtimes only and add water to them. It's best to drink fruit juices and fizzy drinks through a straw, to help cut down the number of acid attacks on your teeth.

### What is the best way to brush my teeth?

You need to brush your teeth to remove all the plaque and to keep your teeth and gums healthy. It is important to brush your teeth twice a day while the plaque is still soft. Brushing your teeth should be part of your daily routine, just like washing your hands and face and brushing your hair.

- Brush your teeth carefully last thing at night and at least one other time during the day, with a fluoride toothpaste. Fluoride is a mineral that helps to keep your teeth strong. The amount of fluoride in a toothpaste is measured in 'parts per million' (ppm).
- Only use a pea-sized amount of toothpaste, containing 1350 to 1500 ppm (parts per million) fluoride, for children over 3 years old. All children up to three years old should use a smear of toothpaste with a fluoride level of at least 1000ppm.
- Spit out after brushing and do not rinse, so that the fluoride stays on your teeth longer.
- Choose a toothbrush with a small- to medium-sized head and soft to medium bristles.
- If you are using a manual brush, use small, round movements. The bristles of the brush should point towards the gum. Don't forget to brush all the different sides and tops of your teeth. If you are using an electric or 'power' brush follow the manufacturer's instructions.
- Visit your dental team regularly, as often as they recommend, to make sure that your teeth and gums are healthy.

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