Salt Water vs Mouthwash for Oral Care | Core Dental

Canonical: https://www.coredental.com.au/salt-water-vs-mouthwash/

Details:

Salt water can be used as a short-term rinse, particularly after procedures such as a tooth extraction, but dentists do not generally recommend it as a long-term substitute for a proprietary mouthwash. At Core Dental our team can advise which rinse suits you and for how long. Used every day over time, salt water can disturb the pH balance of the mouth, while a pH-neutral mouthwash is generally suited to ongoing daily use. Your dentist can tailor advice to your situation.

Can salt water be used instead of mouthwash as an oral disinfectant?

Salt water can be used as a short-term oral disinfectant, particularly after procedures such as a tooth extraction. It is not recommended as a long-term replacement for a proprietary mouthwash. If you have had a procedure with us, follow the aftercare instructions from your dentist, and ask if you are unsure how long to keep rinsing.

Why is salt water suited to short-term use after dental procedures?

Salt water is an isotonic solution. This means it contains the same salts and minerals as the human body, in equal concentrations, so it does not irritate the soft tissues of the mouth. It works as a natural disinfectant, may help reduce tissue swelling and can support healing when it is used for two to three weeks following dental surgery. Our article on how long it takes to recover from wisdom tooth extraction explains when saltwater rinses are generally started after surgery.

What happens if you use salt water rinses long term?

Long-term use of salt water mouth rinses can disturb the pH balance of the mouth. Salt water is not necessarily abrasive, but a change in pH may soften tooth enamel. Softer enamel can make teeth more prone to wear and to developing cavities. For this reason salt water should not be used every day over a long period unless your dentist advises it.

Why is mouthwash better suited to everyday use than salt water?

Mouthwashes are generally close to neutral in pH, so they do not disturb the pH balance of the oral environment in the way salt water can over time. That makes them more suited to regular, long-term use. Always read the label and follow the directions, and ask us if you are unsure whether a product is right for you, for example if you have sensitive teeth, a dry mouth or you are using the product for a child.

What type of mouthwash is recommended for daily use?

The type generally recommended for daily use is a mouthwash that contains a low dose of fluoride, which can help to prevent cavities. Fluoride works by strengthening the outer surface of teeth, and our article on what fluoride is and what it is used for explains how. A mouthwash does not replace brushing and cleaning between the teeth. You can read more about brushing the right way and why cleaning between the teeth matters .

How can you make a saltwater rinse?

A typical saltwater rinse uses about half a teaspoon of salt dissolved in a glass of warm water. Swish it gently around the mouth, spit it out and do not swallow it. If you have had surgery, follow your dentist's instructions about when to begin and how often to rinse. Stop and contact us if a rinse causes pain or stinging.

How can you plan your care and make an informed decision?

A useful first step is to tell us about your concern, symptoms, timing and goals when you book. Bring relevant medical information and a list of your current medicines. Our team can then assess your teeth, gums, bite and surrounding tissues, request imaging where it is clinically appropriate, and explain which options suit you.

Ask what the recommended approach is intended to achieve, whether there are reasonable alternatives, what preparation and aftercare involve, and what risks or limitations apply. Treatment time, fees, recovery and maintenance vary with the diagnosis and the complexity of care. At Core Dental we quote before treatment starts, and a written treatment plan can help you compare stages, expected appointments and payment arrangements before you proceed.

Call 000 immediately for uncontrollable bleeding, breathing or swallowing difficulty, serious facial injury or other life-threatening symptoms. Do not wait for a dental appointment in these situations. For severe tooth pain or swelling without these emergency signs, contact your dental practice promptly. For routine care, prevention and review intervals should be tailored to your individual oral health risks rather than assumed to be the same for everyone.

How can we help?

If you have questions about rinses, mouth care after a procedure or protecting your enamel, our team can help at any of our nine Core Dental clinics across Melbourne. Book a dental check-up , call 13 13 16, or book online.

Further detail from Core Dental

The following points are drawn from Core Dental's own published material on this topic. They are included here for completeness, and anything that applies to your own treatment should be confirmed with your clinician.

While it is not necessarily abrasive, the disturbance in pH could lead to softening of tooth enamel, making your teeth more susceptible to wear and more likely to develop cavities. Certain mouthwashes may also be prescribed to stabilise gum problems. You are advised to use alcohol-free mouthwashes when possible as alcohol-containing products can increase the risk of mouth or oral cancer if used long term. Mouthwashes are only meant to be an adjunct to brushing and flossing daily, and are most definitely not going to aid in prevention of plaque and cavities if used in isolation.

Rinsing right after brushing is the mistake

Before choosing between salt water and mouthwash, there is a question of timing that matters more than the choice itself — and most people get it wrong without ever being told.

The Victorian Department of Health's brushing instruction: "After brushing, spit out the fluoride toothpaste - do not swallow it, and do not rinse with water. This allows the fluoride more time to strengthen your teeth."

Its children's page gives the same instruction with the reason stated plainly: "After brushing, ask your child to spit out the toothpaste, and not to rinse with water. The small amount of toothpaste remaining keeps protecting teeth."

Water is named there, but the logic covers anything you swill. A mouthwash used immediately after brushing rinses off the thin film of fluoride that the toothpaste just left behind — and fluoride is, in the Department's words, "the key ingredient that protects teeth against decay" and the thing that "protects the teeth against acid".

So if you want to use a rinse, separate it from brushing. Not as a finishing step at the basin, but at a different time of day. That single change costs nothing and preserves the benefit of the toothpaste you have already paid for.

Sources: Better Health Channel (Victorian Department of Health), Teeth and mouth care, betterhealth.vic.gov.au (reviewed 25 July 2025); Toothbrushing - children 0-6 years, betterhealth.vic.gov.au (reviewed 4 August 2026); Tooth decay, betterhealth.vic.gov.au (reviewed 28 June 2025). All accessed 6 November 2026.

The two rinses the Department actually specifies, and when

Published advice names specific rinses for specific jobs. Neither is a general daily mouthwash, and both are more useful than a vague "antibacterial rinse" because the job is defined.

After acid: water, a fluoride rinse, or baking soda. The Department's erosion guidance lists what to do "following exposure to strong acids" to help neutralise it:

"rinsing your mouth with water or a fluoride mouth rinse"

"rinsing your mouth with a sodium bicarbonate (baking soda) mouth rinse (one teaspoon of baking soda in a glass of water)"

"consuming dairy products, such as unsweetened milk and cheese"

That baking soda recipe is as precise as the published advice gets: one teaspoon in a glass of water. It is for after acid — after a fizzy drink, after reflux, after vomiting — not for every night.

And crucially, instead of brushing in that window. "Wait at least 30 minutes after the acid exposure before brushing your teeth, to allow your saliva to neutralise the acid in your mouth." A rinse is what fills those thirty minutes. This is the one situation where rinsing is clearly the right move and brushing clearly is not.

For dry mouth: a product range, chosen with a clinician. Where dryness is the problem, the Department lists "dry mouth products" that "contain ingredients such as lubricants", and says the range "includes toothpaste, mouthwash, gums and topical gels". It also names dental products that "may contain high fluoride or calcium to help prevent tooth decay". Its instruction for both is the same four words: "Speak to your dentist for recommendations."

It is worth noting what the Department tells people with dry mouth to avoid, because two of the items are in ordinary mouthwashes and drinks cabinets. Among substances that "increase or irritate mouth dryness" it lists "cigarettes", "e-cigarettes" and "alcohol". A high-alcohol rinse used for a dry mouth works against the thing it is being used for.

For bad breath: assistance, not a cure. "There is no one treatment for halitosis. The treatment will depend on what is causing the problem." The Department allows that "some mouthwashes, lozenges and toothpastes can assist in fighting halitosis", and puts first the two things that are not products: "avoiding dehydration and good oral hygiene, including brushing and flossing".

What no rinse does. It does not clean between teeth. "It is important to clean between teeth where a toothbrush can't reach. Products such as floss and interdental brushes can remove plaque from between your teeth." Without one of those, the Department says, "up to a third of each tooth doesn't get cleaned" — and swilling liquid past a contact point does not change that number. On gum health it asks for this daily: "Clean between teeth daily with dental floss, interdental brushes, or another tool recommended by an oral health professional."

Nor does it replace a look in the mouth. "The early signs of dental disease can be difficult to see. An oral health professional is trained to spot and treat any problems early." And the reason not to use comfort as the test: "Having no pain does not always mean that your teeth and mouth are healthy."

One honest limit on all of the above. The Department does not publish a comparison of salt water against commercial mouthwash, and nothing read here supports a claim that one disinfects better than the other. What it does give is a rinse for a purpose: neutralising acid, managing dryness, assisting with breath. If you want a rinse for something else, that is a question for your own dentist rather than an answer any published page provides.

Sources: Better Health Channel (Victorian Department of Health), Dental erosion, betterhealth.vic.gov.au (reviewed 22 October 2025); Dry mouth, betterhealth.vic.gov.au (reviewed 9 September 2025); Teeth and mouth care, betterhealth.vic.gov.au (reviewed 25 July 2025); Gum disease, betterhealth.vic.gov.au (reviewed 1 August 2025); Halitosis or bad breath, betterhealth.vic.gov.au (the page states its review date as 31 August 2012). All accessed 6 November 2026.

Frequently asked questions

Is it safe to gargle salt water every day?

Salt water is generally suited to short-term use. Using it daily over a long period can disturb the pH balance of the mouth and may soften tooth enamel. If you would like to rinse regularly, ask us whether a fluoride mouthwash suits you.

When should I start rinsing with salt water after an extraction?

Many dentists suggest starting saltwater rinses about 24 hours after surgery, but your dentist will give you instructions for your own procedure. Please follow those and contact us if you have any concerns.

How long can I use salt water after dental surgery?

Salt water can support healing when used for two to three weeks after dental surgery. Your dentist will tell you how long is suitable for you.

Does mouthwash replace brushing?

No. A mouthwash is an addition to brushing and cleaning between the teeth, not a replacement. We can show you a routine that suits your teeth and gums at your next visit.

Which mouthwash should I choose?

A mouthwash with a low dose of fluoride is generally recommended for daily use because it can help prevent cavities. Ask our team which product suits you, particularly if you have sensitive teeth or are choosing for a child.

Should I use mouthwash straight after brushing?

Better not to. The Victorian Department of Health's instruction after brushing is to "spit out the fluoride toothpaste - do not swallow it, and do not rinse with water", because this "allows the fluoride more time to strengthen your teeth". Anything you swill immediately afterwards washes that fluoride away. If you want a rinse, use it at a different time of day.

How do I make a baking soda rinse, and when is it for?

The Department's recipe is "one teaspoon of baking soda in a glass of water", and it is listed among the things to do "following exposure to strong acids" to help neutralise them. It is for after acid, not for every night.

What should I do after vomiting or reflux — rinse or brush?

Rinse. "Wait at least 30 minutes after the acid exposure before brushing your teeth, to allow your saliva to neutralise the acid in your mouth." The Department's options for that window are water or a fluoride mouth rinse, a baking soda rinse, or dairy such as unsweetened milk and cheese.

Is an alcohol-based mouthwash a problem for a dry mouth?

It works against you. Among the substances the Department says "increase or irritate mouth dryness" it lists cigarettes, e-cigarettes and alcohol. For dry mouth it points instead to products containing "ingredients such as lubricants", a range that "includes toothpaste, mouthwash, gums and topical gels", with the advice to "speak to your dentist for recommendations".

Can a mouthwash cure bad breath?

No. "There is no one treatment for halitosis. The treatment will depend on what is causing the problem." The Department allows that some mouthwashes, lozenges and toothpastes "can assist", and puts avoiding dehydration and good oral hygiene first.

Does any rinse clean between my teeth?

No. "It is important to clean between teeth where a toothbrush can't reach", and without floss or an interdental brush "up to a third of each tooth doesn't get cleaned". For gum health the Department asks you to "clean between teeth daily with dental floss, interdental brushes, or another tool recommended by an oral health professional".

Is salt water better than mouthwash, or the other way round?

Nothing in the published state health advice compares the two, so we are not going to claim one disinfects better. What the Department does give is a rinse for a stated purpose — neutralising acid after an acid exposure, managing a dry mouth, assisting with breath. Beyond those, which rinse suits you is a question for your own dentist.

Does a rinse mean I can skip a check-up?

No. "The early signs of dental disease can be difficult to see. An oral health professional is trained to spot and treat any problems early", and "having no pain does not always mean that your teeth and mouth are healthy".

Related services and further reading

Dental check-ups

Dental hygiene

Recovery from wisdom tooth extraction

Recovery following teeth extractions

What is fluoride and what is it used for?

Using fluoride toothpaste

Brushing teeth the right way

Why clean between the teeth

Core Dental at a glance

Nine Core Dental clinics across Melbourne: Southbank, South Melbourne, Caroline Springs, Carrum Downs, Epping, Wyndham, Berwick, Bayside and Glenferrie.

Open six days a week: Monday to Friday 8.00am to 6.00pm and Saturday mornings.

Interest-free payment plans and HICAPS on-site claiming.

Call 13 13 16 or book online.

Contact Core Dental

Phone	13 13 16
Booking	Online through coredental.com.au, or call 13 13 16
Hours	Monday to Friday 8.00am to 6.00pm, Saturday 8.00am to 1.30pm (Bayside 8.30am to 1.30pm), Sunday closed
Clinics	Southbank , South Melbourne , Caroline Springs , Carrum Downs , Epping , Wyndham , Berwick , Bayside , Glenferrie

Results, recovery times and potential risks vary for each individual. This information is general in nature and is intended for people over 18. Seek advice from a qualified, AHPRA-registered practitioner before proceeding.

Can salt water replace mouthwash?

Salt water suits short-term use, particularly after an extraction, but is not generally recommended as a long-term substitute for a proprietary mouthwash. Core Dental can advise which rinse suits you.

Why is salt water used after dental surgery?

Salt water is isotonic, containing the same salts and minerals as the body, so it does not irritate soft tissues. It works as a natural disinfectant and can support healing when used for two to three weeks after surgery.

What can happen if you rinse with salt water long term?

Long-term salt water rinsing can disturb the pH balance of the mouth and may soften enamel, making teeth more prone to wear and cavities. Core Dental suggests asking your dentist before rinsing daily.

Which mouthwash do dentists recommend for everyday use?

A mouthwash with a low dose of fluoride is generally recommended for daily use, as it can help prevent cavities. Our Core Dental dentists and hygienists can suggest a product to suit your teeth.

How do I make a saltwater rinse?

A typical rinse is about half a teaspoon of salt in a glass of warm water, swished gently and spat out. Core Dental dentists will give you timing instructions after any procedure.

Does mouthwash replace brushing and flossing?

No. A mouthwash adds to brushing and cleaning between the teeth but does not replace them. Core Dental hygienists can show you a routine suited to your teeth and gums.

How do I book a dental check-up at Core Dental?

Call Core Dental on 13 13 16 or book online through coredental.com.au. We have nine clinics across Melbourne, open Monday to Friday 8.00am to 6.00pm and Saturday mornings.

What are Core Dental opening hours?

Core Dental clinics are open Monday to Friday 8.00am to 6.00pm and Saturday 8.00am to 1.30pm, with Bayside opening on Saturdays from 8.30am. Clinics are closed on Sunday.