Why Clean Between Your Teeth? Floss and Brushes | Core Dental

Canonical: https://www.coredental.com.au/why-clean-between-the-teeth/

Details:

Cleaning between your teeth matters because a toothbrush cannot reach the spaces between teeth, which make up a significant part of each tooth's surface. Bacteria build up in these spaces, and even under the gum line, and form plaque that can irritate the gums. Left in place, plaque can lead to inflammation, bleeding, decay between the teeth and gum disease. At Core Dental we encourage daily cleaning between the teeth with floss, interdental brushes or a similar aid, and our hygienists can show you which suits you.

Why do you need to clean between your teeth and not just brush them?

Most of us accept that brushing helps prevent a build-up of plaque and tooth decay. But how often do we think about the spaces between our teeth? The interdental space, the area between neighbouring teeth, accounts for a significant portion of the surface of each tooth. If you only brush the outer surfaces, a large portion of tooth surface that a toothbrush cannot reach is left unaddressed. That is why we suggest cleaning between the teeth every day.

What happens if you do not clean between your teeth?

Bacteria tend to work their way between the teeth, and even under the gums, in places a toothbrush cannot get to. Bacteria like to form colonies, and in the mouth these colonies are known as plaque. Plaque can irritate the gums. If it is left untreated, it can stimulate an immune response that results in inflammation and bleeding.

Bleeding gums are not normal. If your gums bleed when you brush or floss, please let your hygienist or dentist know so they can help.

What happens if plaque is left undisturbed for 48 hours or more?

If plaque is left undisturbed for around 48 hours or more, it begins to harden on the teeth. Hardened plaque is called calculus or tartar. You cannot remove calculus with brushing or flossing at home. If calculus has already formed, we recommend a review with your dental hygienist to have it removed.

What are the long-term risks of untreated calculus?

Over the long term, untreated calculus can be associated with the breakdown of the fibres that hold the gums tight against the teeth. This can potentially lead to irreversible bone loss and, in extreme cases, tooth loss. These are long-term consequences, but they show why regular cleaning between the teeth matters, because it helps remove bacteria before they form plaque, or remove plaque before it hardens into calculus.

What are the benefits of daily interdental cleaning?

Daily cleaning between the teeth can:

reduce the risk of decay between the teeth

help reduce bad breath caused by bacteria

reduce the risk of gum disease, which is associated with tooth loss

People with uncontrolled diabetes are at a higher risk of gum disease. Good oral hygiene, including daily flossing, can help reduce the risk of gum disease and may also contribute to the stability of blood sugar. If you have diabetes, please tell your dentist so your care can take it into account.

Which products can help you clean between your teeth?

There are several options, and finding the one that suits you is a matter of trying and asking for advice.

Floss: a cost-effective way to clean between the teeth. There are many types, including waxed floss and floss tape, each with its own advantages. Correct technique is important so you clean between the teeth and under the gum line. Your dental hygienist can teach you the correct technique.

Interdental brushes: these help clean under the gum line and stimulate the gums. They can be used with floss to help keep the gums healthy and are often suggested for people with gum disease. They come in many brands and sizes, and your dental hygienist can show you how to use them and recommend the right size.

Floss handles: these help get floss to hard-to-reach places and are a useful alternative to floss for people who have difficulty reaching the back teeth. Options include disposable floss handles and handles that you wind your usual floss onto.

Water jets: these can be helpful for people with braces, bridges, large food traps or gum pockets, in addition to other products. They can be used with a medicated mouth rinse for people with gum disease. Water jets are not recommended as the only replacement for floss.

Superfloss: the firm end of this pre-cut floss is easy to thread under braces wires or underneath the pontic of a bridge, so it suits people with braces or bridges. Your dental hygienist can show you how to use it.

Should you use toothpicks to clean between your teeth?

We do not recommend toothpicks, because they can damage the enamel layer of the teeth. Interdental brushes are a useful alternative, so ask your hygienist about the size that suits your teeth.

How can we help?

If you would like to know more about dental hygiene, including interdental brushing, our team can help at any of our nine Core Dental clinics. Tell us about your concerns when you book and bring relevant medical information and a current medicines list. Your dentist or hygienist will assess your teeth, gums and bite, request imaging when it is clinically appropriate, and explain which options suit you. Fees and recovery vary with the diagnosis and the complexity of care, and a written treatment plan can help you compare stages and payment arrangements. Fees, offers, rebates and finance terms can change, so please confirm current written terms and any health fund rebate before booking. Call 13 13 16 or book online. Read more about dental hygiene and gum disease treatment .

Cleaning between the teeth is its own instruction, not an optional extra

The published prevention advice treats brushing and cleaning between the teeth as two separate daily tasks. That distinction is easy to lose, and it is the reason this page exists.

The Victorian Department of Health's prevention list, in its own words:

"Brush your teeth and along the gum line twice a day – in the morning and before going to bed."

"Use a toothbrush with a small head and soft bristles, and a fluoride toothpaste from the age of 18 months (use low-fluoride toothpaste from 18 months to 5 years, then a regular fluoride toothpaste from 6 years of age)"

" Clean between teeth daily with dental floss, interdental brushes, or another tool recommended by an oral health professional. "

"Clean dentures every day. Plaque can easily build up on dentures, increasing the risk of gum disease around your natural teeth."

Three details are worth drawing out.

Twice a day for brushing, daily for between. Not "when you remember" and not "as well if you have time". They are listed as separate items with their own frequencies.

"Along the gum line" is part of the brushing instruction. Gum disease starts where the gum meets the tooth — the Department describes gingivitis as affecting "the surface layers of the gum, particularly where the gum meets the tooth". Brushing the chewing surfaces and missing the margin misses the place the problem begins.

Floss is one option of several. The Department lists "dental floss, interdental brushes, or another tool recommended by an oral health professional". If you have struggled with floss, that is not a reason to skip the task — it is a reason to ask us which tool suits the gaps you actually have. Interdental brushes suit wider spaces; floss suits tight contacts. We would rather fit the tool to your mouth than have you give up on the instruction.

Why between the teeth specifically? Because of what plaque does when it is left. Plaque is "a sticky coating containing bacteria", "constantly being formed" as bacteria feed on dietary sugars, and it is the build-up "on teeth and along the gum line" that the Department names as the usual cause of gum disease. The spaces between teeth are where a brush does not reach and where a build-up is least disturbed.

Source: Better Health Channel (Victorian Department of Health), Gum disease, betterhealth.vic.gov.au (page reviewed 1 August 2025; accessed 4 November 2026).

Bleeding when you start is common — and there is a published threshold

Most people who begin cleaning between their teeth notice some bleeding, stop, and conclude they have done harm. The published advice says to keep going, and gives a point at which to seek help instead of guessing.

The Department of Health: "do not stop brushing if your gums are red, bleeding or puffy. Try to keep brushing with a soft toothbrush, as this will get rid of the bacteria and plaque that are causing the problem. The gums should soon start to look and feel better."

And the threshold: " if your gums do not improve or if they keep bleeding after four weeks, see your oral health professional. "

Four weeks is the number to hold. It gives the gums a fair chance to settle while not letting a genuine problem run indefinitely.

Bleeding gums are also one of the two listed signs of early gum disease — the Department names "bleeding gums, especially when brushing or eating" alongside "redness and swelling of the gum" — and at that stage the outlook is good: "the good news is that gingivitis can be reversed."

So bleeding when you start cleaning between the teeth is not evidence you should not be doing it. It is more often evidence that the area needed it.

Where it is not a wait-and-see matter is when the signs belong to the advanced stage. The Department lists those separately: "receding gums (the gum line shrinks away from the tooth making teeth look longer)", "bad breath", "a bad taste in the mouth", "tenderness when biting", and "loose teeth, or teeth that have moved". If any of those are present, the four-week rule does not apply — book an appointment.

One honest note on sources. The children's toothpaste ages quoted above come from the Department's gum disease page, reviewed 1 August 2025. Its own fluoride page, reviewed back in 2012, words the switch slightly differently. We have quoted the more recent of the two, and if the exact age matters for your child, ask us rather than relying on either page alone.

Sources: Better Health Channel (Victorian Department of Health), Gum disease betterhealth.vic.gov.au (reviewed 1 August 2025) and Dental care — fluoride betterhealth.vic.gov.au (reviewed 30 April 2012). Both accessed 4 November 2026.

Frequently asked questions

How often should I clean between my teeth?

We suggest once a day. A consistent routine of brushing and cleaning between the teeth helps remove plaque before it hardens. Your hygienist can tailor advice to your mouth and show you the technique.

Should I choose floss or interdental brushes?

Neither suits everyone. Floss works well where teeth are close together, and interdental brushes suit larger gaps and are often suggested for people with gum disease. Your hygienist can recommend the right size and type for you.

Can I use a water jet instead of floss?

Water jets can help, especially with braces, bridges, food traps and gum pockets, but they are not recommended as a sole substitute for floss. They are usually used alongside other cleaning aids.

Why do my gums bleed when I floss?

Bleeding can be a sign that plaque is irritating the gums. It is not normal, so please see your hygienist or dentist. Cleaning gently and consistently can help, and checking the cause is important.

Can I remove tartar at home?

No. Calculus that has hardened on the teeth needs to be removed by a dental hygienist or dentist. Daily cleaning helps prevent more from forming.

Is cleaning between the teeth a separate instruction from brushing?

Yes, and that is how the published advice treats it. The Victorian Department of Health lists brushing "twice a day – in the morning and before going to bed" and, as its own item, "clean between teeth daily with dental floss, interdental brushes, or another tool recommended by an oral health professional." Two tasks, each with its own frequency.

Does the brushing instruction include the gum line?

Yes. The Department says to "brush your teeth and along the gum line twice a day". That matters because gum disease begins at the margin — its description of early gum disease is that it affects "the surface layers of the gum, particularly where the gum meets the tooth". Brushing only the chewing surfaces misses where the problem starts.

When does bleeding stop being something to work through?

After four weeks. The Department's threshold is explicit: "if your gums do not improve or if they keep bleeding after four weeks, see your oral health professional." Until then its advice is to keep cleaning with a soft brush rather than stopping, because that is what removes the plaque causing the bleeding.

Which signs mean I should not wait the four weeks?

The ones that indicate the advanced stage. The Department lists receding gums "making teeth look longer", bad breath, "a bad taste in the mouth", "tenderness when biting", and "loose teeth, or teeth that have moved". If any of those are present, book an appointment rather than waiting out a month.

Why do dentures need daily cleaning if I still have my own teeth?

Because an uncleaned denture puts plaque against the teeth you have kept. The Department lists it among its prevention items: "clean dentures every day. Plaque can easily build up on dentures, increasing the risk of gum disease around your natural teeth." A partial denture sits directly against natural teeth, so it is part of the same daily routine rather than a separate one.

Related services and further reading

Dental hygiene

Dental check-ups

What does a hygiene appointment involve?

Brushing teeth: are you doing it right?

How to keep your gums healthy

Why do people suffer from gum disease?

Can chewing gum really clean your mouth?

4 things to avoid if you have sensitive 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, with Monday to Friday hours to 6.00pm and Saturday mornings.

We quote before treatment starts and offer interest-free payment plans.

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 Saturday 8.30am to 1.30pm), Sunday closed

This article is general in nature and does not replace advice from a registered dental practitioner who has examined you. Results, recovery times and potential risks vary for each individual. Seek advice from a qualified, AHPRA-registered practitioner before proceeding.

What is the interdental space?

The interdental space is the area between neighbouring teeth, where a toothbrush cannot reach. Core Dental hygienists can show you how to clean this area daily with floss or interdental brushes.

How does plaque form between the teeth?

Bacteria collect in the spaces between teeth and under the gums and form colonies known as plaque. Core Dental dentists and hygienists can check these areas and remove plaque during your visit.

How long before plaque hardens into tartar?

Plaque left undisturbed for around 48 hours or more begins to harden into calculus, also called tartar. A Core Dental hygienist can remove calculus that has already formed.

Which interdental cleaning aids does Core Dental suggest?

Our team talks through floss, floss handles, interdental brushes, water jets and superfloss, depending on your teeth, braces or bridges. Your Core Dental hygienist can recommend the right choice and size.

Are toothpicks a good way to clean between teeth?

No. Core Dental does not recommend toothpicks because they can damage the enamel layer of the teeth. An interdental brush of the right size is a safer alternative.

Does gum disease link to diabetes?

People with uncontrolled diabetes are at a higher risk of gum disease, and good oral hygiene may help support stable blood sugar. Please tell your Core Dental dentist if you have diabetes.

Who can teach me the correct flossing technique?

Your dental hygienist at Core Dental can teach you correct flossing technique and show you how to use interdental brushes, floss handles and superfloss so you clean under the gum line effectively.

How do I book a hygiene appointment at Core Dental?

Call 13 13 16 or book online through coredental.com.au at any of our nine Melbourne clinics. Tell us about bleeding gums or other concerns and we will arrange a suitable visit.