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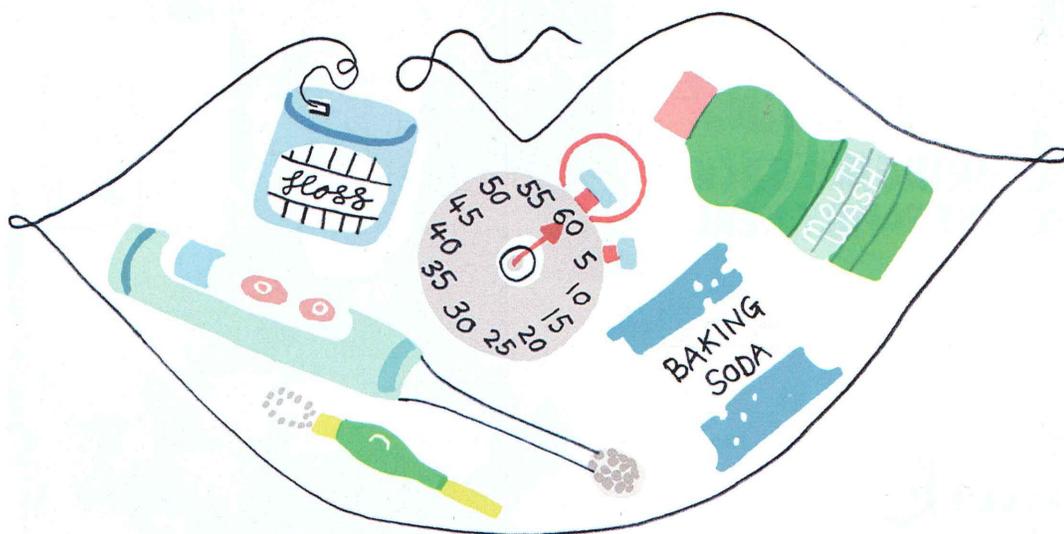
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Spring-Clean Your Smile

You know that rewarding feeling of scrubbing every corner of your home? Get the same satisfaction from **CARING FOR YOUR TEETH** by brushing up with our dental guide.



YOU'VE BEEN BRUSHING your teeth all your life, but are you doing it right? Did you know, for example, that it's more effective to floss first and then brush? And that you should brush for longer than most TV commercial breaks? Besides the obvious aesthetic benefit, properly caring for your teeth can help stave off not only gum but also heart disease. Moreover, a healthier mouth means fewer visits (and payments) to the dentist—and who wouldn't grin about that?

FLOSS FIRST

Flossing is just as important as brushing and should be a daily event (not a task desperately done the night before the semi-annual dentist appointment). "I tell my patients, 'Flossing is like training for a marathon; you don't go out and run 25 miles the first day,'" says Sally Cram, D.D.S.,

a consumer adviser for the American Dental Association. She recommends building up to at least a once-daily habit before bed—trying for every other day and working your way up.

Bear in mind that the point of flossing isn't to prove how quickly you can snap a taut piece between two teeth. Instead, you want to gently rub the floss back and forth along the edges of each tooth, dipping about two or three millimeters below the gum line to remove plaque buildup. Waxed or Gore-Tex floss may be easier to maneuver if your teeth are tightly spaced, but "a wider-tape floss usually works for a lot of people," Cram says.

BRUSHING BASICS

You probably already know you're supposed to brush twice a day, in the morning and before going to bed. But you

don't have to scrub with the vigor of Lady Macbeth. A light touch and a brush with soft (or extra-soft) bristles will do, says Gregg Lituchy, a cosmetic dentist and partner at Lowenberg & Lituchy, in New York City. For clues that you might be brushing too hard, Lituchy recommends looking at your toothbrush: Are its bristles splayed like a punk rocker's Mohawk? Cram also suggests checking your gums. If they're receding—and coming to a peak, as opposed to a rounded curve, at the base of each tooth—you're brushing too hard.

Rather than applying so much pressure, try for proper time, tools, and technique. Allot two minutes for brushing, Lituchy says, spending 30 seconds on each quadrant (upper right, upper left, lower right, and lower left). Be warned: This might feel like an eternity if

you're used to the old scrub-scrub-spit sprint. Some of the latest electric toothbrushes have built-in timers that pause or beep every 30 seconds, or when two minutes are up. Lituchy recommends the Sonicare FlexCare+ by Philips. If you prefer a manual toothbrush, Lituchy suggests Improve Toothbrushes, which have a V-shaped bristle pattern that hugs the teeth and gently massages gums at the same time.

When it comes to technique, Cram says, proper brushing follows a circular pattern, "like making little Os, around each tooth and along the gums, and ultrasonic brushes are helpful if you have a hard time mastering this movement." For an effective (and affordable) toothpaste, try making your own: Mix one part peroxide with two parts baking soda. The combination attacks surface stains and kills bacteria hiding under the gums, Lituchy says.

READY TO RINSE

Using mouthwash is the final step because it whisks away any lingering debris or plaque. Lituchy recommends an alcohol-free rinse such as the Natural Dentist Healthy Gums Daily Oral Rinse to kill bacteria left behind after the first two steps. Once you've flossed, brushed, and rinsed, your teeth will look and feel so clean, you won't be able to wipe the smile off your face.