

The Other Half of Cleaning Teeth Flossing Finishes The Job Brushing Can't Do Alone

Do you wash just half your face, or shampoo only one side of your head? People who brush their teeth and call the job complete are essentially doing just that. Although brushing cleans the front, back, and biting surfaces of teeth, the bristles of a toothbrush don't always reach between the teeth. This can leave food particles and bacteria between them, creating a sticky mixture called plaque. Plaque is the primary cause of tooth decay, gum disease, and bad breath. Dental floss is one of the tools available for the other half of the job. Flossing cleans the sides of our teeth and can help prevent plaque from forming. Most dentists recommend cleaning between the teeth once per day.



Brushing and flossing are really two halves of the same task. You're really not finishing the job if you don't floss. Unfortunately, research shows many people are not finishing the job of cleaning their teeth. The American Dental Hygienists Association reports that 55 percent of the people who floss do it every day—meaning that even among the faithful flossers, 45 percent don't floss every day. Women tend to floss more than men, and people over age 50 floss more than children and young adults.

What can we do to train ourselves to finish the job brushing can't? A start is to regard flossing as the first step, not the last, in cleaning our teeth. Flossing helps dislodge material and plaque that can be more readily brushed away. Another strategy is to look at when we floss and when we don't and try to introduce flossing into more parts of our daily routines. The American Dental Hygienists Association notes that 14 percent of the people who do floss do so before breakfast; 26 percent between breakfast and lunch; 19 percent between lunch and dinner; and 32 percent after dinner only. Sixty-seven percent of regular flossers say they do it before going to bed.

To increase the likelihood of flossing, choose dental floss that is comfortable and suited to your teeth or personal tastes. Today, floss is offered in varieties to meet different needs—whether you prefer thin or thick floss, dental tape, flavored or unflavored floss, or waxed or unwaxed floss. Waxed floss may be easier for users to slide through tight and restored (rebuilt) teeth. Unwaxed floss tends to spread out its fibers during use, offering greater tooth contact. Floss holders are another option to consider. While these may limit flexibility in moving the floss between and around individual teeth, they offer a tradeoff for some in convenience and comfort. Floss holders are also ideal for people who have difficulty manipulating floss, and for caregivers who floss the teeth of others.

The routine you establish for flossing and the methods you use aren't as important as actually doing it! By flossing, you will be finishing the job of cleaning your teeth properly that brushing only begins.