DELTA DENTAL

Arizona's Oral Health Expert

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Your smile can be one of your best assets; in fact, many people say it's the first thing they notice about strangers. We've assembled 13 tips to help you keep your mouth healthy and make the most of your grin over the next year.

13 Ways to Take Care of Your Smile

1. Stop smoking. You already knew that, but here's a reminder why: Smoking makes your teeth yellow and can also lead to gum disease, tooth loss and oral cancers.

2. Keep regular dental appointments. If you avoid the dentist now, you may develop dental problems that will require more complicated treatments later on.

3. Brush your tongue. Just like your teeth, your tongue holds a plethora of food and bacteria that can cause bad odors if left untreated. Buy a tongue scraper or be sure to give your tongue a good brushing every time you have your toothbrush out.

4. Don't neglect the molar teeth in the very back of your mouth. Because they do a lot of the heavy lifting when it comes to chewing, molars get just as dirty as the rest of your teeth, if not more so. Despite this, they seem to get less toothbrush time than other teeth. Pay extra attention to the sides next to the tongue.

5. Floss more. If you're not flossing at least once a day, you're not flossing enough. It's the single best way to remove plaque from places your toothbrush can't reach. Use about 18 inches of floss per session.

6. Switch to gum with xylitol. Yes, you can chew gum. If the main sweetener is xylitol, regular use may actually stop bacteria from sticking to tooth enamel. Your second-best bet is sugar-free gum, which doesn't promote tooth decay and can help get saliva flowing to wash away food particles from teeth.

7. Rinse with water after eating. It's usually inconvenient to brush after eating, but even rinsing with water helps wash food and debris from your teeth, and denies cavity-causing bacteria a meal. It also keeps your mouth moist, which helps prevent dry mouth and bad breath.

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Get Your Best Smile Ever!

Most people aren't born with perfect smiles. Here are a few things you can do to ensure you're putting your best smile forward.

1 Your future's so bright

If your teeth are yellowed or dull from drinking coffee or red wine, you may be able to brighten them up. There are many different whitening options available – which one you choose depends on the level of whiteness you're hoping to achieve and how fast you wish to achieve it. Having fillings, crowns or other dental work will also affect which technique best fits your needs. Most whitening toothpastes just remove surface stains. If you want to actually whiten the natural shade of your teeth, professional whitening sessions with dentists are generally the fastest and strongest option, while over-the-counter methods such as whitening strips are more economical but take longer to work. Talk with your dentist to determine which whitening treatment is best for you.

2 Seal the deal

Help eliminate the need for future fillings by getting sealants applied to your children's teeth. Sealants, a very thin plastic coating usually painted over the chewing surfaces of molar teeth, help prevent bacteria from settling into the grooves of teeth that can be hard to brush well. Getting sealants is a painless procedure that takes just a few minutes per tooth and can last up to 10 years. They are most effective when applied to children's permanent molar teeth shortly after they erupt, typically between ages 5-8 for first molars and ages 10- 14 for second molars.

3 Cover it up

When teeth are perfectly healthy but not as aesthetically pleasing as you'd like them to be – perhaps they're discolored, too short, too far apart, or misshapen – veneers can help. Veneers, a thin covering placed on top of your real teeth, are made from one of several tooth-colored materials, such as porcelain or composite resin. Veneers need to be cared for just like real teeth, so it's important to brush, floss, use a mouthguard and keep regular checkups, just as you would normally do. Ask your dentist if veneers would work for you.

Healthy Recipe

Creamy Grape Dessert

Ingredients:

1 lb. green seedless grapes, washed and dried well
1 lb. red seedless grapes, washed and dried well
8 oz. Greek yogurt
4 oz. light cream cheese, softened
1/4 cup Splenda or other sugar substitute
1 tsp. vanilla extract

Topping:

2 T. packed brown sugar
1/2 cup chopped walnuts or pecans

Directions:

1. Slice grapes in half and then set aside.
2. Mix yogurt, cream cheese, sweetener and vanilla in a bowl.
3. Stir grapes into mixture and spread evenly into a large serving dish.
4. In a separate bowl, combine brown sugar and crushed walnuts or pecans.
5. Sprinkle the mixture over grapes.
6. Keep chilled until ready to serve.

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Find the Best Dentist for You

Has it been a while since your last dental appointment? Maybe even years? The new year is the perfect opportunity to get back on track with regular dental appointments. It's one resolution you can knock off your list right away: **Just pick up your phone and make a call.** If you don't have a regular dentist, however, you might need to do a little research first.

Ask for a reference

Check with friends, neighbors or co-workers to see if they would recommend their dentists. If you've recently moved or are planning on moving, see if your former dentist can recommend someone in your area. Use the Delta Dental "Find a Dentist" tool to locate dentists in your area who are in the Delta Dental network.

Ask questions

After you find a dentist, ask some questions before making a final decision. A few questions to consider:

1. What should I expect during the first exam?
2. How does the dental team keep up with new techniques and industry practices?
3. If there is an emergency, how is it handled? For example, most dentists have agreements with other offices or referral services so you can be seen even when your dentist is not available.
4. What services are performed in the office and when would you need to see a specialist?
5. If you have a specific condition, ask if the dentist has experience in treating it.
6. If you are looking for a dentist who specializes in areas such as oral surgery, gum disease, root canals or braces, ask if they are board-certified or board-eligible members of their specialty organization.
7. If you have dental benefits and cost is a concern, ask if they belong to your dental network. It is usually less expensive to go to an in-network dentist.

Play "I spy" at your appointment

At your first appointment, look for a clean and organized office, a dentist who takes time to answer questions and explain things, and a courteous and professional staff. If a lot of repair work is recommended, ask about options and the risks and benefits of each. There are typically multiple ways to restore lost or damaged teeth, often with wide variations in price, effectiveness and long-term outcome. Make sure you get information up front about fees and payment plans, and don't be afraid to ask questions and take notes. Finding a dentist that's right for you can mean the difference between making and keeping regular appointments or avoiding the dentist until you have an emergency.

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13 Ways *continued*

8. Use a mouthguard. Although they're required for many high-impact sports such as football and ice hockey, they should be used in *any* sport that may pose risks to your teeth, including basketball, cycling, gymnastics, skateboarding and more. Don't have a mouthguard? Talk with your dentist about having one made or other options, like store-bought mouthguards.

9. Stop chewing your nails. It's bad for your teeth *and* your hands. Nail biting has been linked to other behaviors that are bad for your mouth, such as teeth grinding and jaw clenching.

10. Stop bad breath. Occasional halitosis, or bad breath, is pretty common. It can be caused by coffee, onions, garlic and other strong-smelling foods and drinks. If your bad breath persists long after these culprits are gone, consider talking with your dentist to determine the cause – tobacco use, prescription medication, your diet or even systemic illnesses may be the reason.

11. Your teeth are not scissors. Don't use them to rip open packages. Using your teeth as tools can lead to a cracked tooth, which may mean a root canal or even an extraction. Use something else to open sealed bags or turn tight bottle caps.

12. De-stress. People who clench or grind their teeth often do so because of stress. Try to de-stress by eating right, getting regular exercise and making it a point to relax your face and jaw muscles several times throughout the day.

13. Smile more. Smiling – even forced smiling – has been scientifically proven to improve your mood. Smiles are contagious, so not only will you feel happier, you might brighten someone else's day as well.

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