

Daily Union Article

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Title: Brush-Up on Dental Hygiene Facts

February is National Children's Dental Health Month. If you have elementary-aged kids, you have likely seen some of the information they have received about taking good care of their teeth and improving their dental hygiene as a whole. They aren't the only ones who need reminded of this very important daily task. Perhaps we all need to "brush-up" on our dental hygiene habits.

Although I am not a dentist or dental hygienist, I am keenly aware of the cost a person pays for not taking care of their teeth through good oral hygiene. In fact, I think it is safe to say that I have more crowns than the Queen of England! I didn't pay attention to the warnings as a child, and I am paying for it as an adult.

It's never a bad idea to review dental hygiene practices to make sure you and your family avoids a similar experience. The American Dental Association (ADA) offers these basic steps to maintain good dental health.

Brush your teeth at least twice a day. When you brush, don't rush. Take enough time to do a thorough job.

Use the proper equipment. Use fluoride toothpaste and a soft-bristled toothbrush that fits your mouth comfortably. Consider using an electric or battery-operated toothbrush, which can reduce plaque and a mild form of gum disease (gingivitis) more than does manual brushing. These devices are also helpful if you have arthritis or other problems that make it difficult to brush effectively.

Practice good technique. Hold your toothbrush at a slight angle — aiming the bristles toward the area where your tooth meets your gum. Gently brush with short back-and-forth motions. Remember to brush the outside, inside and chewing surfaces of your teeth, as well as your tongue.

Keep your equipment clean. Always rinse your toothbrush with water after brushing. Store your toothbrush in an upright position, if possible, and allow it to air-dry until using it again. Don't routinely cover toothbrushes or store them in closed containers, which can encourage the growth of bacteria.

Know when to replace your toothbrush. Invest in a new toothbrush or a replacement head for your electric or battery-operated toothbrush every three to four months — or sooner if the bristles become frayed.

We can't forget about the importance of daily flossing, either! You can't reach all the places plaque can build up simply by brushing. There are too many places that a brush can reach – like between your teeth and under the gumline. Daily flossing around each tooth gets rid of the buildup in these areas.

You may be thinking – it's not that big a deal. Well, according to the Centers for Disease Control, about 78% of Americans have had at least 1 cavity by the age of 17. The age group with the highest percentage of both treated and untreated cavities falls in children 6 – 8 years of age. This is not just a childhood concern. The percent of adults' ages 20 – 44 years with untreated dental caries was 27.4% in 2011-12.

What you may not realize is that dental health affects more than your teeth and gums. Oral and general health is strongly linked. The mouth and face reflect signs and symptoms a variety of health concerns and diseases. Saliva and other oral cells and fluid, can be used to detect drug use, hormonal changes, and other specific diseases. Studies have shown that there is evidence of association between periodontal disease and diabetes, cardiovascular disease and stroke, and adverse pregnancy outcomes, the extent to which is yet unknown. *(Source: National Institute of Dental and Craniofacial Research)*

Oral health problems can also impact a person's quality of life by interfering with daily living. Eating may become a challenge for someone with dental issues. A person with oral health problems may find it uncomfortable to eat the fresh fruits and vegetables that are known to have more nutritional value than cooked and processed fruits and vegetables. If a person is having pain in their mouth, they may not be able to eat much solid food at all, regardless of its nutritional value. A common side-effect of pain is the loss of appetite. The combination of loss of appetite and inability to chew will have a significant impact on their physical well-being.

Another way that oral health can impact a person's quality of life is in the area of social/emotional well-being. Admittedly, different cultures will view the need, frequency, and access of health care in a variety of ways. These same differences will impact the priority given to oral health. Yet, in many cultures, oral health is highly valued by society and individuals. It affects the appearance of the face as a whole, as well as the way people communicate with each other. Often, individuals with poor teeth will choose not to smile. When a person doesn't smile in greeting, it sends non-verbal messages which might be perceived as "I am mad", "I don't like you", or "Don't talk to me." In reality, it may be that the person is not trying to convey a negative message but rather is uncomfortable with their appearance when they smile. This mixed message will impact how relationships are initially formed and may impact the social/emotional well-being of the individual.

Establishing and maintaining a daily routine for oral health promotes overall well-being. It serves as a preventative strategy to disease, illness, poor nutrition, while providing a positive impact on a person's social and emotional well-being. For more information on living practices that promote overall well-being, contact me at the Geary County Extension Office at 785-238-4161. Until next time, keep living resourcefully!