

Tartar and plaque

Why the toothache? It could be a result of:

- Poor food choices
- Bacteria
- Bad brushing technique
- Not enough flossing
- Heredity
- Lack of professional care

Take your pick; the list is long. But you can keep plaque under control and prevent it from destroying your smile, but it takes a little time and effort. Since the alternative is painful gum disease and tooth loss, it is worth it.

We all know that we should rid our teeth of tartar and plaque using either conventional methods or home remedies, but exactly what roles do tartar and plaque play in our oral health? Other bacteria infect the gums, producing the first symptoms of gum disease, such as redness, inflammation, and bleeding. If left untreated, gum disease may progress to the point that the infection literally destroys the bone that holds the teeth roots in place. That is why gum disease is the major cause of tooth loss among adults over age 35.

For starters, let us define the two players.

Plaque, which is by far the most villainous, is a soft, sticky, nearly invisible film of bacteria that accumulates on teeth and dental restorations (fillings, crowns, and dentures, for example) and on the gums and the tongue. Some of the bacteria in plaque cause tooth decay, and some are responsible for periodontal, or gum, disease. Plaque is always with us. A newborn baby's mouth is sterile, but only for the first ten hours or so of life.

Plaque is the culprit in cavities and gum disease. The longer plaque hangs around in your mouth, the more trouble it causes. As certain bacteria in

plaque feed off fermentable carbohydrates (which include sugars, even those in fruit and milk, and starchy foods such as breads, pastas, and crackers), they produce an acid that eats away at tooth enamel, causing cavities.

Tartar is a calcified material that often contains bacterial debris and sometimes plaque. It is a white, chalky substance. Although tartar (also called calculus) can make it easier for plaque to stick around, the stuff is generally considered to be primarily a cosmetic problem.

Both plaque and tartar can form above and below the gum line. It takes a dentist or dental hygienist to remove tartar from anywhere in the mouth and to remove plaque from below the gum line.

Home Remedy Treatments for Tartar and Plaque

Dental hygiene is very important -- especially if you want to keep your teeth healthy and clean. The following tips will help you to keep tartar and plaque at bay.

Brush. Focus on quality, not quantity. You may brush after every meal, snack, or sip of soda, but if your technique is not correct, you will not be doing your teeth much good.

1. Hold the brush at a 45-degree angle against the gum line. Point the brush upward, or toward your nose, when you are cleaning the upper teeth; downward, or toward your chin, when you are doing the lower teeth. Working the bristles at this angle will ensure that you clean the gum line, which too many brushers miss.
2. Use a short (about the width of half a tooth) back-and-forth motion to clean the outer surfaces of your teeth. Focus on just one or two teeth at a time. And be gentle; you are not scrubbing the floor or the bathtub. Brushing too hard can damage the gums and the teeth.
3. Use this same stroke on the inside surfaces of all the teeth, except the front ones. Remember to keep the brush angled (at 45 degrees) toward the gum line.

4. Scrub the chewing surfaces of your back teeth with the brush held flat in the same back-and-forth motion.
5. Tilt the brush vertically, and use the front (or top) part of the brush in short up-and-down strokes to clean the inside surfaces of the front teeth, both top and bottom.
6. Do not forget to brush your tongue. It can harbor disease-causing plaque, too.

Use the right tools.

Use a soft nylon brush with rounded-end, polished bristles. Hard bristles (as well as brushing too hard) can wear away the enamel that protects your teeth and can form grooves in the teeth. What is more, abrasive bristles can also damage tender gums, causing them to recede, or pull away, from the teeth.

Get a brush with a head that is small enough to reach all of your teeth, especially those in the back. Some adults may actually prefer using a child-sized brush. Do not be stingy with toothbrushes, either -- replace your brush every three months or sooner if the bristles become frayed, splayed, or worn.

Do not worry about going hi-tech.

An old-fashioned manual toothbrush can clean teeth just as effectively as any electric product. But if your manual dexterity is not up to par or you think having a teeth-cleaning toy will make you brush longer and more often, an electric brush may be a good idea.

Use fluoridated toothpaste. Choose a product with the ADA's seal of acceptance. What's so wonderful about fluoride? It combines with the minerals in saliva to 'remineralize,' or strengthen, the teeth, preventing cavities in both children and adults. You may think you do not get cavities anymore, but as you get older, your gums recede, exposing the roots of teeth, which lack the protective coating of enamel and are prone to a type of decay known as root caries.

Try tartar-control toothpaste. If you tend to develop a lot of tartar, using such a product can help. While these toothpastes do not eliminate tartar altogether, studies show that they can reduce tartar deposits by 30 to 40 percent. Chemicals such as pyrophosphate in tartar-control pastes interfere with the deposits of calcium salt.

Floss. Too many people think of flossing simply as a way to dislodge the roast beef or popcorn kernels stuck between their teeth. But regular (once a day, at the very least) use of dental floss is essential for cleaning between teeth and under the gums and warding off both cavities and gum disease. Here's how to floss correctly:

1. Start with 18 to 24 inches of floss, and wind most of it around the middle or index finger on one hand (whichever finger is the most comfortable for you).
2. Wrap the rest of the floss around the same finger on the other hand. Think of this other finger as the take-up spool for the used floss. Do not scrimp. Use a clean section of floss as you work between each tooth. Otherwise, you are just moving bacteria from one tooth to another.
3. Hold the floss tightly with your thumbs and forefingers, leaving about an inch of floss between them. The floss should be taut.
4. Use a gentle 'sawing' motion as you pull the floss between the teeth. Be careful not to snap it into the tender gum tissue.
5. When you have reached the gum line, curve the floss into a 'C' shape to fit snugly around the tooth, and slide it into the space between the gum and tooth gently.
6. Bring the floss out from the gum and scrape the side of the tooth, following its contour from bottom to top to remove as much plaque as possible. After you pull it out, use a clean section of floss to clean the tooth on the other side of that space.

7. Be sure to clean the back side of the last tooth on each side, both top and bottom.

Relax about wax. Do not worry about choosing between waxed or unwaxed floss. Pick what is comfortable. Flavored flosses are fine, too, especially if you find yourself using them more frequently. If your fingers are too awkward, you suffer from arthritis, or you have a lot of bridgework, floss threaders and/or any of the various floss holders may help; they are available at drugstores.

Know that there is no substitute for flossing. Flossing is the best way to clean between your teeth. No other method works nearly as well. But if you absolutely, positively refuse to floss, ask your dentist or hygienist about alternatives.

Some dentists recommend soft wooden inter-proximal cleaners. Inter-proximal brushes, which look like tiny bottle brushes, work, too, but will not always fit in tight spaces between teeth. Oral irrigators can help hose down the nooks and crannies in your teeth, too, but these products are not a replacement for flossing. A word of caution: Do not use oral irrigators until after you have brushed and flossed because of the danger of pushing debris or plaque deeper into a pocket.

Test yourself. Disclosing tablets or solution, available at drugstores, can reveal the plaque that is left after you have brushed and flossed. At first, you may be shocked by how much plaque you have been missing, but do not get discouraged. While it is impossible to remove every bit of this bacterial nuisance, using these tablets can show where you are not cleaning thoroughly and help you improve your brushing and flossing skills.

Wet your whistle. Saliva naturally cleanses the mouth and helps fight bacteria. But dry mouth is a side effect of some 300 to 400 different medications, including antidepressants, antihistamines, and drugs used to treat high blood pressure and Parkinson's disease. A disease called Sjogren's syndrome, which can accompany some rheumatoid conditions, also slows down the flow of saliva (and causes dry eyes, too). If you have

had radiation therapy to the head and neck for cancer, your saliva glands may have been damaged.

You can fight dry mouth with sugarless gum or candy or with artificial saliva, available over the counter. It is also wise to take frequent sips of water. Dry mouth tends to worsen during sleep, try coating your lips, mouth, and tongue with mineral oil (then spit it out) before getting into bed (but after brushing and flossing).

Do not rely on 'miracle' rinses. The commercials on television look so appealing: A swig of this product, a few swishes in the mouth, and, almost like magic, and all that nasty plaque is gone. If only it were that simple. You cannot rinse away plaque and tartar. Most endorsements are also legalized fraud.

Everything you put in your mouth affects the health of your teeth, including the food you eat.

Natural Home Remedies for Tartar and Plaque

Following are some helpful home remedies for tartar and plaque that use foods and condiments you will find in the kitchen.

Coconut oil. Massage this into sore gums for relief.

Salt. Dissolve 1 teaspoon salt in 1 cup warm water, and rinse your mouth with it to help treat bleeding gums, canker sores, and toothache. Salt makes great whitening toothpaste, too. Pulverize salt in a blender, food processor, or coffee grinder, or spread some on a cutting board and roll it with a pastry rolling pin to crush it into a fine sand-like texture. Mix 1 part crushed salt with 2 parts baking soda, then dip a dampened toothbrush into the mixture and brush your teeth. Keep the powder in an airtight container in your bathroom. This mixture also helps remove plaque.

Sesame oil. Gargling with warm sesame oil is an Ayurvedic treatment--the holistic system from India--for gum disease. Take a mouthful and swish it around twice a day, then rinse. It is also said that this simple gargle can

reduce cheek wrinkles. What a great bonus!

Vinegar. Here is an easy (although temporary) toothache fix. Try rinsing your mouth with a mixture of 4 ounces warm water, 2 tablespoons vinegar, and 1 tablespoon salt.

Spoon. Brushing or scraping your tongue is an important part of your oral hygiene routine. It rids your mouth of bacteria and food particles, and it stimulates your salivary glands to wake up and get to work. Use a spoon to scrape from the back of the tongue to the front, repeating until you have covered the entire area.

Ice. That is the last thing you want to stick on an aching tooth. Well, do not stick it on your tooth; use it on your hand. Rub an ice cube in the soft spot between your thumb and first finger. This acupressure treatment may stop tooth pain. If your jaw is really throbbing and swollen, though, an ice pack to the face for about ten minutes every hour will help relieve both the pain and the swelling. Just be careful, as rapid cooling can increase pain. If that does not work, try moist heat.

Apples. Munching on a raw apple an hour after a meal cleans the teeth and helps heal the gums.

Cheese. Bacteria may be just waiting to destroy your tooth enamel. Cheese is their sworn enemy. First, it stimulates the salivary glands to clean the mouth. According to studies, just a few ounces of hard cheese eaten after a meal may protect against decay. There is also evidence to suggest that fatty acids in cheese may have antibacterial properties. And finally, cheese proteins may actually coat and protect tooth enamel.

Figs. To ‘strengthen’ your teeth, eat 4 figs at one time, once a day. Chew well and slowly. This stimulates the saliva flow and cleanses the mouth.

Lemon juice. Squeeze the juice of half a lemon into a cupful of water and drink to staunch bleeding gums and gingivitis. Do not take lemon juice full strength, as it can erode tooth enamel.

Melon. Any melon will do. One hour after eating, chew some melon slowly. It will help stop gums from bleeding.

Milk. Milk is a good source of calcium, an essential mineral for strong teeth and bones. Drinking a glass of milk can help promote dental health. (Note: Milk is mildly acidic, so do not put your baby to bed with a bottle; it may cause severe decay.) Check these other calcium-packed foods: yogurt, broccoli, Swiss chard, and salmon.

Strawberries. They are a wonderful tooth whitener. Rub the juice on the teeth and leave for five minutes. Then rinse off with warm water that has a pinch of baking soda dissolved in it.

Tea bag. Black tea contains fluoride that can suppress the growth of bacteria that cause decay and dental plaque, the sticky white film that forms on your teeth. (When it hardens, it is called tartar.) Drop a tea bag of black tea into a cup of hot water, and let it brew for six minutes. This will allow the maximum amount of fluoride to escape into the water. Squeeze the tea bag into the water before discarding it to get that last little bit of fluoride. Use the tea as a rinse to prevent plaque buildup after you eat sweets.

Watercress. Chew fresh watercress several times a day to treat sore or bleeding gums.

Allspice. It helps relieve toothache. Wet your finger and dip it into the spice, then rub it along the gum line near the aching tooth. You can also steep some in a glass of warm water, and then rinse your mouth with it. Not only does this rinse relieve pain, it also makes your breath fresh.

Cloves. Cloves contain eugenol, a chemical with natural antiseptic and anesthetic properties. That explains why ground cloves have been used to relieve toothaches for thousands of years. Moisten 1 teaspoon powdered cloves in olive oil and pack it into an aching cavity. Dentists still use a mixture of eugenol and zinc oxide before applying amalgam when filling teeth.

Coriander. This spice, as well as thyme and green tea, has antibacterial properties. Brew a tea from your choice of the three and use as a mouth rinse after meals.

Sage. Add 2 teaspoons sage to 2 cups water, and then boil. Cool for 15 minutes, and then swish in your mouth for several minutes. Sage has an antibacterial property that may reduce decay.

Sesame seeds. Chew a handful slowl. Brush your teeth with a dry toothbrush, using the chewed seeds as you would toothpaste. They will both clean and polish.