

Flossing can be a valuable adjunct to a good oral hygiene regime once most of the permanent teeth have erupted. There are many types of floss, tape and interdental cleaning devices on the market, but currently only about one household in ten uses floss¹. This factfile explains the reasons for flossing, how and when to floss and gives details of the varieties of floss on the market.

Why should people floss?

Plaque is a sticky layer of bacteria which, if left to accumulate on the tooth surface, can cause gingival inflammation (gum disease) and dental decay. Toothbrushing helps to remove plaque. But brushing alone will usually not remove all the plaque, especially from areas between teeth and under the gum line. By regularly flossing you will clean the hard to reach areas. You should still also visit a dentist regularly for professional cleaning.

How often should you floss?

It is best to check with your dentist or hygienist on your flossing needs – about frequency and possibly about parts of the mouth that need particular attention, as well. For most people flossing once a day is enough to reduce the risk of gum disease².

Should you floss before or after brushing?

It doesn't matter. It is best, however, to try and brush and floss after your last meal, before bedtime².

What is the recommended age to start flossing?

It is generally advised that flossing begins after most of the permanent teeth have erupted. As a guide, a child of twelve will usually have most of their second teeth³. Children who have crowded teeth might be encouraged to floss earlier. Check with a dentist or hygienist before taking up flossing, as they will be able to advise on how to floss correctly without damaging the gums.

What if I find it difficult to floss?

Flossing needs a certain amount of manual dexterity, and not everyone finds it easy. It can be difficult for people with large hands, or tightly packed teeth, or rough restorations (fillings) and crowns. Also, for some people, flossing causes a gag reflex (a retching sensation)⁴. If flossing is difficult your dentist or hygienist may suggest other options for cleaning in between the teeth, such as floss in a special holding device, special brushes or dental sticks, and they will show you how to use them.

What is the best flossing technique?

It is best to ask your dentist or hygienist for a demonstration, before taking up flossing. But generally it is advised that you:

- Take a length of floss about 18 inches long;
- Wrap the ends around the middle fingers of each hand, leaving 2-3 inches between the fingers (figure1);



Figure 1

Using the forefingers and thumbs to grasp the floss near the middle, slide the floss into the space between two teeth. Be careful not to force or snap the floss between the contact areas, as this may injure the gum line (figure 2). If the contact area is very tight gently slide the floss horizontally forward and back until it squeezes through;

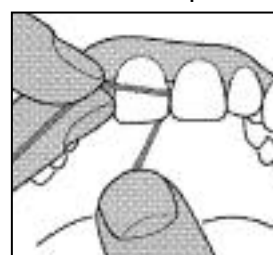


Figure 2

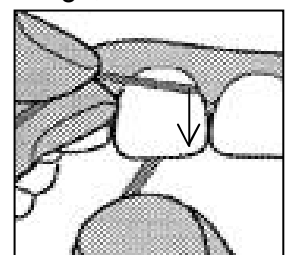


Figure 3

- Curve the floss, in a 'C' shape, around the tooth with fingers as close to the tooth as possible;
- Move the floss up and down the side of the tooth several times, gently stroking the plaque away from the gums and off the teeth (Figure 3);
- Then pull the floss out of the space between the teeth;
- Wind more floss onto one middle finger and off the other to reveal a fresh piece as it becomes soiled;
- Repeat with the side of the next tooth and continue around the mouth.

You may wish to rinse after flossing to remove any debris⁵.

What does it mean when gums bleed after flossing?

Often, if you are new to flossing or do not floss regularly your gums may bleed. This is a sign that the gums are inflamed because of gum disease. As you start to floss daily, using the correct technique, the bleeding and gum disease should stop.

Can flossing damage gums?

No, not if you floss properly. This is why it is important to ask your dentist or hygienist for a demonstration. When flossing remember to be gentle and not to move the floss vigorously up the side of the teeth. If you experience pain when flossing it probably means that you are pushing the floss too far under the gum margin (Figure 3 shows how far under the gum line to slide the floss).

What type of floss should I use?

There are different types of floss and tape on the market. Some are waxed to allow them to slide

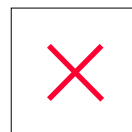
between tightly packed teeth more easily, some are unwaxed. Some are fluoride or flavour enhanced. Choose the floss that you find the most comfortable and easy to use. Your dentist may recommend a particular type of floss. There is no clinical or trial evidence to date to show that fluoride or anti-bacterial additions to floss make them better for dental health.

Which flosses or tapes are accredited by the BDA?

The BDA Accreditation scheme helps consumers identify products which have demonstrated 'safety, quality and efficacy' to an independent panel of experts. Generally, these are brands from major manufacturers who are committed to research into the improvement of oral care products.

BDA accreditation for floss and tape is based primarily on a review of data to demonstrate safety in normal use – specifically safety data relating to the gingival and dental tissues. The BDA expert panel also expect to see clear instructions for use on the packaging with a reference to seeking advice from a dentist or hygienist before flossing for the first time. If the product contains a therapeutic or preventive agent claiming to provide adjunctive benefits to dental or gingival health, such as triclosan or fluoride, the panel would expect to see these claims supported by clinical studies.

The only floss currently accredited by the BDA is [®]GLIDE Floss (made by Gore). This floss will carry the BDA logo on packaging.



References:

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Note: The illustrations were provided by W. L Gore and Associates, the manufacturers of GLIDE products.