

Some mouthwashes may help to reduce the amount of germs in the mouth. By using a mouthwash as a rinse before starting dental procedures, germs in aerosols can be decreased. Therefore, this may help minimise your and your dental practitioner's exposure to infections and, subsequently control the spread of infections.

Things to remember

- Use a mouthwash as recommended by your dental practitioner and/or follow the instructions on the label.
- Swish the recommended amount of mouthwash in your mouth for about 30 seconds (or the recommended time) and spit it out. Do not rinse your mouth with water afterwards as this will wash away the mouthwash and dilute the benefits using the mouthwash has on your oral health.
- Never swallow a mouthwash, as it may contain some ingredients that are harmful to your body if ingested in large quantities. Accidentally swallowing a little mouthwash is generally not harmful but ingesting large amounts can be dangerous.
- Do not use a mouthwash containing alcohol if you have dry mouth as it can make dry mouth worse.
- A mouthwash is an aid to mechanical removal of plaque by toothbrushing and flossing.
- A mouthwash is not a replacement for toothbrushing and flossing.
- Using a mouthwash as a rinse before starting dental procedures may help minimise exposing both you and your dental practitioner to infections, and further control the spread of infections.

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Mouthwashes and Oral Health

Information for Patients

Special Topic No. 23



There are many different types and brands of commercially available mouthwashes. These can be purchased over the counter but a recommendation from your dental practitioner is advisable for some. Your dental practitioner may suggest you use a mouthwash in the following situations:

As an aid to toothbrushing and flossing

Plaque, a sticky layer of germs on your teeth, is a main cause of tooth decay and gum disease. Mechanical cleaning by toothbrushing and flossing is the most effective personal hygiene method to remove plaque (Figure 1).



Figure 1: Toothbrushing and flossing

However, mechanical cleaning alone may leave behind some plaque on your teeth, because either your toothbrushing technique does not adequately remove all the plaque, or toothbrushing/flossing is not done regularly enough. In such situations, your dental practitioner may recommend using a mouthwash daily in addition to your oral hygiene routine of toothbrushing/flossing. However, please remember to use a mouthwash as recommended by your dental practitioner and be aware that a mouthwash cannot replace your regular toothbrushing and flossing habits. Also, if you are using a mouthwash purchased over the counter, remember to follow the instructions on the label.

To prevent formation of dental cavities

Some mouthwashes contain fluoride as an active ingredient that acts locally to protect against the formation of dental cavities. Your dental practitioner may recommend these mouthwashes, particularly for children, and if you have irregularly aligned teeth (malocclusion - Figure 2a) that makes it difficult for you to brush/floss your teeth.



Figure 2: a) Irregularly aligned teeth (malocclusion), b) Red, swollen and bleeding gums (circled)

To control gum disease

Your dental practitioner may recommend a mouthwash to control gum disease, particularly if you have inflamed gums with redness, swelling and bleeding (Figure 2b). Chlorhexidine is the most commonly used active ingredient in these types of mouthwashes.

To help heal mouth sores/relieve pain

Mouthwashes can be particularly effective in helping to heal minor sores in the mouth such as those caused by:

- Accidental injuries to the mouth such as cheek bites, toothbrush abrasions and mouth burns caused by overly hot foods/drinks (Figure 3)
- Minor injuries resulting from dental procedures, orthodontic appliances (such as braces) and dentures
- Mouth ulcers, minor inflammation around wisdom teeth, and denture irritation.

In these situations, your dental practitioner may prescribe a mouthwash with an active ingredient that helps to promote wound healing and alleviate pain and discomfort associated with mouth sores. Please be aware that these mouthwashes are recommended for temporary use only. Please see your dental practitioner if your symptoms/sores persist.

To help relieve the effects of dry mouth/bad breath

Dry mouth and bad breath are common conditions that cause discomfort. Your dental practitioner may recommend a mouthwash containing a hydrating formula to help alleviate the effects of dry mouth. These mouthwashes are alcohol free and most of the commonly available mouthwashes contain ingredients that can refresh your breath and help you to get



Figure 3. Sore tongue due to mouth burn (circled)

To use as a rinse before starting dental procedures (preprocedural rinsing)

Dental procedures, which include the use of handpieces, ultrasonic scalers, air-polishers and air-water syringes (Figure 4), produce aerosols. Aerosols are a suspension of tiny particles or droplets in the air, such as dust, mists, or fumes. These particles are generally not visible to the naked eye but may be inhaled or absorbed by the skin. These aerosols may contain germs (bacteria, viruses and other infectious agents) that can live in the air for up to four hours and contaminate surfaces about 1-3 meters away from the original source. Aerosols can contaminate you as well as your dental practitioner and their dental equipment while you receive treatment at a dental clinic. Therefore, you may be exposed to the germs in aerosols and be at risk of contracting and spreading infections.

Figure 4: Aerosol generating dental procedures. a) High-speed handpiece, b) Ultrasonic scaler, c) Air-polisher, d) Air-water syringe

