

brushes can be reused several times, provided their bristles are thoroughly rinsed with water after each use. You need to replace your interdental brush with a new one when its bristles are worn and/or the wire is bent or twisted.

Water flosser

A water flosser, also known as oral irrigator or water jet, is a powered interdental cleaning tool that uses a stream of pressurised water from a water reservoir to clean between teeth (Figure 5). The water stream, directed through a nozzle, flushes out plaque, bacteria and food debris from between your teeth and under your gums. Water flossers require mains power or batteries to operate, in addition to water.



Figure 5: Using a water flosser

Water flossers are hygienic, easy to use, even for people with less manual skills, e.g., patients with arthritis, a good option if you have small gaps, crowded teeth, and dental appliances including braces and implants. Water flossers can easily access back teeth and last a long time compared with other tools. Water flossers need power, water and access to a sink, all of which may limit its use as an interdental cleaning tool.

Toothbrushing is the main method of removing plaque, but brushing alone does not remove plaque between your teeth. Plaque that tends to collect between your teeth can cause tooth decay and gum disease. Therefore, it is recommended that you brush your teeth twice a day and clean between teeth using an interdental cleaning tool daily to keep your teeth and gums healthy.

Dental floss is the most commonly recommended interdental cleaning tool, while other tools such as toothpicks, interdental brushes and water flossers can be used. Your dental practitioner will help you to choose the most suitable interdental cleaning tool for you and instruct you on how to use it.

Interdental Cleaning

Information for Patients

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Plaque (a sticky, colourless film of bacteria that forms on your tooth surfaces) can initiate both tooth decay and gum disease. Toothbrushing is the main personal hygiene method to remove plaque. However, you cannot remove plaque collected between your teeth by brushing your teeth only. Plaque tends to accumulate more between your teeth (interdentally) than on other tooth surfaces. Hence, dental disease is likely to occur interdentally. Therefore, to keep your teeth and gums healthy, brushing your teeth twice a day with daily interdental cleaning is recommended. Interdental cleaning means cleaning between your teeth using an interdental cleaning tool. The four main interdental cleaning tools available are:

- Dental floss
- Woodsticks/toothpicks
- Interdental brush
- Water flosser

Dental floss

Dental floss is one of the most commonly recommended interdental cleaning tools. It looks like a piece of string made up of strands of fibre woven or wrapped together. There are different types of dental floss available – dental floss, dental tape and floss holders. Traditional dental floss (Figure 1a) is usually made of multiple strands of nylon woven together (multifilament). Dental tape (Figure 1b), a monofilament floss made of polytetrafluoroethylene (PTFE), is very similar to dental floss, but it is broader and flatter than dental floss. Tape is easier to control and does not shred as easily. Floss holders/flossettes (Figure 1b) are good for people with limited manual skills. Floss and tape is either waxed or unwaxed and comes in a variety of flavours. Flossing is easier with waxed floss, but it may not fit the tight gaps.

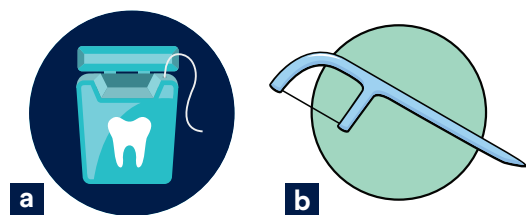


Figure 1: (a) Dental floss/tape (b) Floss holder

Flossing is a somewhat difficult technique to master. The correct flossing technique makes cleaning between teeth effective and reduces injury to gums. Once a child has two teeth in contact (aged about 2 years), a parent/guardian can start flossing their teeth.

To receive maximum benefits from flossing, use the following steps:

- Step 1.** Stand in front of a well-lit mirror and examine your teeth. Identify the space between neighbouring teeth.
- Step 2.** Use about 45cm of floss or tape. Wind one end around the middle finger of one hand, the other around the middle finger of the other hand, leaving your index fingers free. Wrap more floss around the middle finger of one hand to release new clean floss as you go. Leave about 10 cm of floss between your hands (Figure 2a).
- Step 3.** Use your thumb and tip of your index fingers to hook around the floss to pull it stretched between your hands. Slide this stretched section, which should be only about 3 cm in length between neighbouring teeth, a finger on one side and thumb on the other side of the tooth. Use gentle 'sawing' movements (Figure 2b).
- Step 4.** Move the floss up and down on the tooth surfaces, pushing back against one surface, pulling forward against the other. Floss down to the edge of the gum, and where your gums look like triangles, floss down both sides of the triangle. Do not press so hard as to cause pain. Be careful not to hit your gums suddenly causing injury.
- Step 5.** Work your way around the mouth in a systematic manner, being careful not to miss the space between any teeth. For example, start flossing from back teeth on one side of your upper jaw and keep flossing until you reach back teeth of the other side. Then move on to back teeth on the same side of your lower jaw and continue flossing until you reach back teeth of the other side. When the floss gets soiled move to a new section of floss. Have a good rinse once you complete flossing.

Remember flossing removes plaque, not just food. Blood/blood stains on the floss or bleeding gums may indicate that you have gum inflammation due to plaque gathered between your teeth. If you keep flossing regularly, gum inflammation will improve. Consult your dental practitioner if bleeding persists.

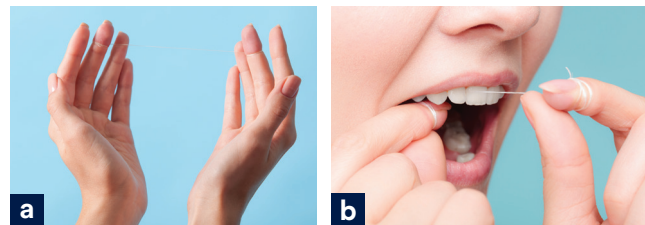


Figure 2: Flossing steps (a) Step 2 – use about 45cm of floss, leaving about 10cm between your hands (b) Step 3 – use a stretch of about 3cm and gently move the floss between your teeth

Woodsticks/toothpicks

Wood sticks/toothpicks (Figure 3a) are generally used to remove food debris after meals. They usually have a tapered shape with a blunted end. The blunted end is placed between the teeth near the gum line, and the toothpick is moved gently in and out of the gap (Figure 3b). You must not place too much pressure on the tip. Although wood sticks/toothpicks are cheap and easy to use they can lead to gum and splinter injuries, and tooth wear.

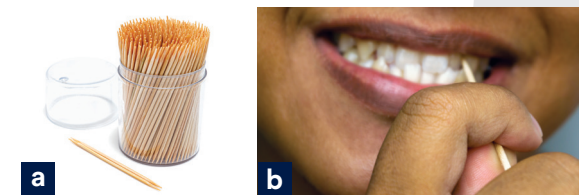


Figure 3: (a) Toothpicks/woodsticks (b) Using a toothpick for interdental cleaning

Interdental brush

An interdental brush (Figure 4) is a small brush designed to clean between teeth by passing it between your teeth. It has a short handle often attached to a thin wire core, which is covered with soft fibre bristles.



Figure 4: Using an interdental brush for interdental cleaning

As the size of the gaps between your teeth may vary, different sizes of interdental brushes are available. Using the correct size interdental brush that fits the gap between your teeth will provide the most benefit. You can seek advice from your dental practitioner on sites in your mouth that will benefit most from using interdental brushes, how to choose the correct size/s and how to use them.

Interdental brushes are a good option for cleaning between teeth if you have large gaps between teeth and dental appliances such as braces, implants and bridges. Interdental