



# Keep on top of your dental health

Why it's important not to neglect your dental health during the pandemic

**T**he pandemic has been stressful for many of us, impacting our oral health and influencing our eating and drinking habits," says Orla Kennedy, CEO for the Dental Health Foundation ([dentalhealth.ie](http://dentalhealth.ie)), a non-profit charitable trust committed to improving oral health in Ireland for over 40 years. "Anxiety may cause oral hygiene neglect. Stress, in general, can depress our immune system, making the body more vulnerable to oral and other health issues."

Orla says there is a lot more to oral health than simply taking care of your teeth. "It's not just about your teeth. It is a gateway to all body health, enabling us to smile, speak, touch, smell, taste, chew, swallow and convey a range of emotions through our facial expressions with confidence."

## Impact

According to a recent National Covid-19 Food Study by UCD and DCU, eating and snacking more has increased during

lockdown, leading to weight gain. Orla says, "What we consume to nourish our body, and our eating habits, influences our health and wellbeing. A good diet not only reduces the risk of health-related issues, such as coronary heart disease and stroke, but it also reduces the risk of tooth decay."

Oral health impacts overall health with scientific research linking it to gum disease, diabetes, cancer, and cardiovascular disease.

"Most people will have experienced tooth decay and gum disease by their early twenties. If tooth decay is not treated, it can cause pain, infection, and may result in tooth extraction."

Orla says prevention is key. "Beginning good oral hygiene practice early on in life, like brushing with a fluoride toothpaste (at least 1,000ppm) and flossing, will establish beneficial daily habits to avoid dental decay. Fluoride helps prevent cavities and tooth decay by making tooth enamel stronger.

"Avoiding sugary foods and drinks – especially snacking between meals, will also have a big impact. The average sugar

content in a fizzy drink is higher than an adult recommended sugar intake – a 330ml can contain almost eight teaspoons of sugar."

## Technique

When taking care of your oral health, Orla also recommends choosing the right tools for good oral hygiene. "Along with fluoride toothpaste, this includes a soft/medium toothbrush.

"Brush your teeth twice a day, in the morning and at night before bed. Replace your worn toothbrush regularly – around every three months when the bristles wear down."

Technique is important when brushing. "Brush your teeth and gums for 2-3 minutes using a gentle circular motion, and spit out the toothpaste. Don't rinse after brushing, otherwise you are rinsing the fluoride off your teeth.

"The average time most people brush their teeth for is 45 seconds. The average length of a song is two minutes, so hum

your favourite tune when brushing!"

Orla also advises flossing daily, or as regularly as possible, to remove plaque and food particles under the gum line and between the teeth.

## Considerations

However, Orla does highlight that there can be certain considerations when it comes to dental hygiene, depending on what stage of your life you are at.

"As soon as a child's first teeth appear, they are at risk of tooth decay. You can help your baby avoid tooth decay and gum disease with simple daily oral habits. For example, after feeding and before bed, wipe their gums with a clean damp cloth to remove bacteria and sugars. When the first tooth appears (around six months), clean with a soft brush and water twice daily. Avoid toothpaste for under two-year-olds, unless advised by your dentist. Make sure to visit your dentist by your baby's first birthday."

Orla says children aged 2-7 years old should be supervised when brushing their teeth, to help them to spit and not to swallow the toothpaste. "Children aged eight and over, teens, and adults will go a long way in protecting their overall oral health by practicing the daily oral routine mentioned above.

"If you wear braces, make sure you brush thoroughly every time you eat to remove food particles."

Orla adds, "A visit to the dentist at least once a year for a check-up is an essential part of looking after your oral health, to prevent tooth decay, gum disease, bad breath and for a mouth cancer examination. You should visit your dentist even if you have no teeth or wear dentures."