

The Massachusetts Dental Society (MDS) is pleased to make this publication available to our member dentists as a way of communicating important oral health information to their patients.

Information in *WORD OF MOUTH* articles comes from dental health care professionals of the MDS and other leading professional dental organizations, including the American Dental Association. If you have any questions about specific content that may affect your oral health, please contact your dentist. For more information regarding oral health, please visit the Public Resources section of the MDS website at massdental.org.

Your comments and suggestions regarding *WORD OF MOUTH* are always welcome. All correspondence and requests for additional copies may be sent to:

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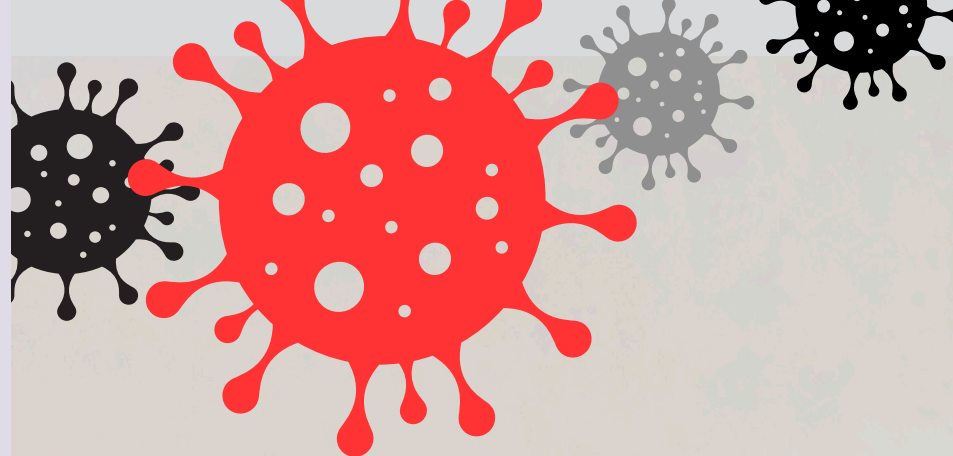
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COVID-19 AND THE FLU: Prevent the Spread and Keep Your Mouth Healthy, Too

Health experts have spent most of 2020 instructing us on how we can all help flatten the curve and slow COVID-19 infection rates by washing our hands with soap and warm water for at least 20 seconds and following social distancing guidelines such as wearing a mask, avoiding large gatherings, maintaining a safe distance (6 feet away) from others, and staying home if we're not feeling well. The coronavirus is scary enough and warrants our concern, but things are about to get even more complicated as we enter cold and flu season.

Influenza (flu) and COVID-19 are both contagious respiratory illnesses, but they are caused by different viruses, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). COVID-19 is caused by infection with a new coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2) and the flu is caused by infection with influenza viruses. Many of the symptoms of COVID-19 and the flu (fever, chills, shortness of breath, cough, muscle aches, fatigue, congestion, sore throat, headache) are similar, so it may be tricky to tell the difference, in which case testing may be required to help confirm a diagnosis. If you are experiencing any of the symptoms listed above and aren't sure if you have the flu or COVID-19, contact your primary care physician, who can help determine if you require testing. In addition to its COVID-19 guidelines, the CDC recommends a yearly flu vaccine as the first and most crucial step in protecting against influenza and its potentially serious complications, but it's also important to take everyday preventive actions to stop the spread of germs.



By following some basic precautions, you and your family can stay physically healthier and maintain good oral health.

No doubt, we are all handwashing experts by now, but the truth is that washing your hands frequently during any time of the year is important. And the Massachusetts Dental Society recommends that you also practice good hand hygiene when it comes to brushing and flossing your teeth.

Germs on your hands can easily be transmitted to your toothbrush and then to your mouth, so it's important to wash your hands before and after brushing your teeth and flossing. Many people may not realize that viruses and bacteria can live on your toothbrush. According to the CDC, the flu virus can live on moist surfaces for up to 72 hours. Since toothbrushes come into contact with your teeth, gums, and saliva, it's a good idea to keep them isolated from other brushes, as well as from surfaces that touch other brushes, like toothbrush holders, countertops, and bathroom cups. And, of course, you should never share your toothbrush, but this is especially true when you are sick. You should also replace your toothbrush every three months, but if you have any doubts, you may want to consider tossing your brush and getting a new one after you've been sick.

If you do catch a common cold or the flu, or experience mild coronavirus symptoms in the coming months, here are three ways you can look out for your oral health:

- 1) Avoid cough drops with sugar or ingredients such as fructose or corn syrup.** Sugar helps fuel cavity-causing bacteria, so sucking on sugar-filled cough drops can be as bad as sucking on candy.
- 2) Drink plenty of water.** When it comes to staying hydrated, water is the best bet. It helps keep your saliva flowing and prevents dry mouth. Juice is a go-to for dealing with a sore throat and sports drinks may be helpful for replenishing electrolytes, but moderation is key since many contain high quantities of sugar.
- 3) If you have a stomach flu that leads to vomiting, consider waiting to brush your teeth.** Brushing right away can spread stomach acids all over your teeth's enamel. Instead, swish with water or mouth rinse and spit, then brush about 30 minutes later.

Now more than ever, it's important that we all follow health experts' guidance to keep ourselves and others virus-free. That means following social distancing guidelines, getting your annual flu shot, and contacting your doctor if you think you may have contracted or been exposed to the coronavirus. To learn more about COVID-19 and the flu, visit [cdc.gov/flu/symptoms/flu-vs-covid19.htm#table](https://www.cdc.gov/flu/symptoms/flu-vs-covid19.htm#table).

