

Word[®] OF MOUTH

A SEMIANNUAL PUBLICATION OF THE MASSACHUSETTS DENTAL SOCIETY

C**VID-19** and Your Oral Health



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.

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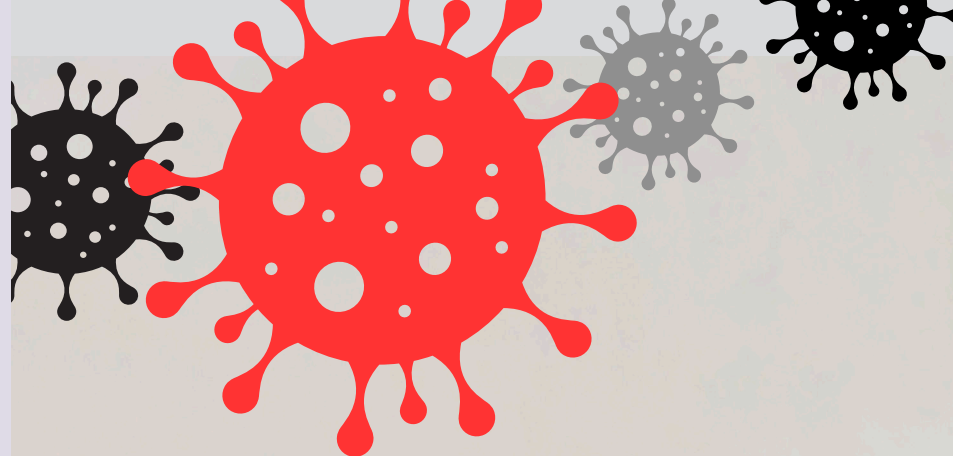
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COVID-19 AND THE FLU: Prevent the Spread and Keep Your Mouth Healthy, Too

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).





Eat Healthy to Curb Pandemic Weight Gain and Have a Healthy Smile



As of March, when the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic forced many states—including Massachusetts—to issue stay-at-home orders and millions of Americans to quarantine, many people's way of life changed dramatically. Schools and offices were shut down, and non-essential businesses—such as gyms and fitness centers—were shuttered to help flatten the curve and slow the spread of the disease. This has been a stressful time, with infection rates in some states increasing at an alarming rate and the prospect of the arrival of a vaccine looking like later rather than sooner. Everyone deals with stress differently, and for many Americans that has meant turning to “comfort foods” to ease anxiety. Snack food manufacturers have seen their sales skyrocket, with the *New York Times* reporting that cookie and cracker sales shot up by nearly 30% in the early days of the pandemic. A survey by the International Food Information Council found that in the first month of the pandemic, 27% of respondents said they were snacking more. With fitness centers and gyms closed and people couch-bound early on in the pandemic, this combination of eating more and moving less has led to what some jokingly refer to as gaining “the COVID-19” (a pun on the “Freshman 15” weight gain that college students often struggle with during the first few months away from home). But this situation is far from a laughing matter.

While these are incredibly stressful times, it's important that we stay as healthy as possible. A poor diet can lead not only to weight gain, but also to high blood pressure, digestive problems, and increased risk of illnesses. According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, people with certain health conditions like obesity, heart conditions, type 2 diabetes, and high blood pressure are at an increased risk of severe illness from COVID-19. For years now, research has pointed to a link between periodontal (gum) disease and cardiovascular disease and stroke, which is why it's important now

more than ever that you maintain good oral health. And that includes being mindful of what you put in your mouth, because oral health is overall health.

When you eat anything, the bacteria naturally present in your mouth convert a food's sugar and starch into acids, which attack the enamel on your teeth and cause tooth decay. The more often you eat foods that contain sugars and starches, and the longer these foods remain in your mouth before you brush your teeth, the greater your risk for tooth decay. That's why it's important to brush your teeth after every meal, ideally, to brush away any food particles that may be clinging to or stuck in between your teeth.

For good oral and overall health, keep these guidelines in mind:

- Limit the amount of sugary and starchy foods you consume, especially between meals when you are least likely to brush after eating. If you do snack between meals, brush with fluoride toothpaste as soon as possible.
- Read the nutritional labels on the foods you buy, and watch out for how much hidden sugar and starch you are actually consuming.
- Snack on healthier fare, like cheese, vegetables, and fruit. Crunchy fruit contains sugar but also has a high-water content, which dilutes the effects of the sugar and stimulates the flow of saliva, an aid in washing away food particles.
- Watch what you drink. Try to limit your intake of soda and fruit juices, and drink plenty of water, which will help rinse any food particles from between your teeth. And if you're drinking bottled water, pay close attention to what's in—or isn't in—the water, because not all bottled water contains fluoride, which is proven to prevent cavities.
- Take a daily multivitamin to ensure that you are getting all the nutrients your body needs. Calcium and vitamin D are essential for good tooth and bone development.



Protecting You During Your Dental Visit

For years, dental offices have taken steps to protect patients and dental health care team members against disease transmission during treatment. You may see some of these measures in the waiting area and the clinic, but many take place behind the scenes.

In the Waiting Area

Your dental office wants to keep you and other patients safe from the minute you walk in the door. Coughing and sneezing can spread germs. For that reason, you should cover your mouth and nose whenever you cough or sneeze. To help with this, many offices provide disposable masks or tissues in the waiting area to use when you are sick.

Clean hands are also important. Often there is hand sanitizer in the waiting room. To clean your hands with a sanitizer, rub a small amount of it all over the surfaces of your hands and fingers until your hands are dry.¹

In the Clinic

You may have heard about personal protective equipment (commonly referred to as PPE), which consists of different equipment that dental care providers wear

to protect them from germs spread through blood, saliva, or airborne particles. Examples of this equipment include gloves, jackets, gowns, safety glasses, and face masks that cover the nose and mouth. For some treatments, face shields may also be worn. Most of these items are disposable, used for only one patient, and thrown away after use. Those that are not disposable must be cleaned with disinfectant between patients.

Other surfaces in the treatment area—like chairs, countertops, blood pressure cuffs, and light handles—must also be disinfected between patients.

Behind the Scenes

Rest assured, any instruments used during your treatment must be clean. Some, like the tube used to suck saliva from your mouth, are disposable.

Instruments that are not disposable must be handled carefully after every patient. After your treatment, these instruments must be taken to a special area to be washed, sorted into sets for the next use, and put in a special oven called an autoclave to expose them to high heat designed to kill germs.

Even the quality of the water used during your dental treatment must be monitored. Water from the dental unit must be the same quality as drinking water.² To achieve this, a dental office may use water from a source other than the public water system or may treat the water system. Regardless of where the water comes from, your dental office must check the quality regularly.

Conclusion

Dentists work hard to keep patients safe during their visits. These are only some of the steps dentists take to reduce the risk of infection. If you have questions about infection control, ask your dentist or the dental team members.

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Don't Let Halloween Play Tricks on Your Kids' Teeth

It's probably safe to say that due to the coronavirus, kids in America won't be celebrating Halloween in the traditional way this October. Even though some kids may already wear masks as part of their costumes, the increased risk of contracting COVID-19 may cause parents and communities to press

pause on trick-or-treating and seek out other safer ways for kids to celebrate. That may take the form of driving the kids to only family members' houses, ringing the doorbells of just a few close neighbors (and wiping down candy packets with antibacterial wipes), or having children trick-or-treat at home, which sounds like less fun but is one way to ensure that everyone gets their favorite candy. While this all might make you want to say "Boo!" to COVID-19, odds are a fair share of candy will still be consumed this Halloween, so Moms and Dads shouldn't forget about the effect all that sugary stuff could have on their kids' teeth.

While consuming several pieces of candy on Halloween may not immediately be harmful to your teeth, excessive and continuous candy consumption can impact oral health. The more you eat sugary foods like candy, and the longer sugars

remain in your mouth before you brush your teeth, the greater your risk for tooth decay, especially in young children. Teeth are more susceptible to decay during the first few years after eruption in the mouth. Since children are getting teeth until around age 13, their teeth are more vulnerable to decay.

You also want to be mindful of the types of candy your child is consuming. Sticky, gummy candies have the most cavity-causing potential, because these types of treats get easily stuck between teeth and orthodontic brackets, and as a result are not easily brushed away. Hard candies can also be an issue because they are consumed slowly, exposing the mouth to sugar over longer periods of time.

Parents should make sure that children brush and floss their teeth after eating candy, and shouldn't let them go to sleep without brushing the sugary residue from their teeth.

Another piece of advice for parents is to not let Halloween treats hang around the house for too long. Parents may want to consider allowing their kids to have a few pieces of candy each day for one week and then hiding, tossing, or donating the rest.

It's been a challenging year for everyone, especially children, but with some minor adjustments, you can let them have some Halloween fun and keep them smiling despite what's happening outside your front door.





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HEALTHY SMILE TIPS

- Brush your teeth twice a day with a fluoride toothpaste.
- Clean between your teeth daily.
- Eat a healthy diet that limits sugary beverages and snacks.
- See your dentist regularly for prevention and treatment of oral disease.

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