

# Word<sup>®</sup> OF MOUTH

A SEMIANNUAL PUBLICATION OF THE MASSACHUSETTS DENTAL SOCIETY



**It's Safe to Go  
to the Dentist  
During COVID-19**



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 may be sent to:

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# It's Safe to Go to the Dentist During COVID-19

Since the COVID-19 pandemic first hit the United States in early 2020, our lives have changed dramatically. Quarantine lockdowns have forced many of us to switch on a dime to working from home and learning virtually. We've bought our groceries online and ordered takeout to help local restaurants stay afloat. We've worn face masks, washed our hands, and used hand sanitizer. We've followed social distancing guidelines and stayed home, canceling in-person playdates, family gatherings, and large holiday celebrations. We've done all this to help slow the spread of the coronavirus so that we can protect our community, our loved ones, and ourselves. Still, many of us have dealt with the immeasurable loss of family members and friends to the virus or battled COVID-19 ourselves, and faced the unknown fear of what contracting the virus could do to us, especially those at risk with other serious health conditions. Fear of contracting COVID-19 has been a big influencer in the past year, and for good reason. However, the Massachusetts Dental Society wants to let residents know that you shouldn't let that fear force you to overlook your oral health. It is safe to go to the dentist right now, even for routine cleaning and exams. Your teeth and gums hold important clues to other health issues (such as heart disease, stroke, diabetes, premature births, and osteoporosis), so delaying your routine dental care could be detrimental to your oral and overall health.

This guidance is echoed by both the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the American Dental Association (ADA). Since dentists in Massachusetts began reopening their practices for non-emergency appointments in June 2020, they have been following new enhanced health and safety protocols, such as:

- Following daily patient volume limits
- Screening patients in advance of care
- Requiring masks for all patients, companions, and staff
- Enforcing social distancing measures, as well as minimizing time in waiting areas and contact between patients through scheduling modifications
- Allowing sufficient time in between patients to remove airborne contaminants and thoroughly clean and disinfect the rooms and equipment
- Adhering to all other CDC requirements and Massachusetts reopening guidelines

While going to the dentist may look different than it did at your last appointment prior to COVID-19, dental professionals have always been required to complete extensive and ongoing training in infection control.

A study conducted last summer by the ADA revealed that less than 1% of dentists have contracted COVID-19 at work, and there have been no reported instances of COVID-19 transmission taking place in a dental office. These results support the effectiveness of the infection control recommendations from the ADA and CDC in helping to keep dental professionals and patients as safe as possible.

It's important that you not let your oral health lapse. Delaying routine visits could lead to minor oral health problems becoming chronic or emergency conditions, so it is important to keep in touch with your dentist about any symptoms you may be experiencing between your semiannual appointments. Learn more at massdental.org/safe-dental-care. You can also call your dentist, who will be more than happy to tell you about the office protocols designed to ensure your safety.





# Don't Let COVID-19 Stress Grind You Down



**T**he COVID-19 pandemic has had wide-ranging effects, and the lifestyle changes—however big or small—we’ve had to adapt to have resulted in many of us experiencing levels of stress we may never have encountered before. Financial stress because of job loss or reduced working hours or salary, childcare challenges, adjusting to new work or school systems and routines, the fear of becoming ill or spreading the virus to others, being isolated from family and friends, and even going to the grocery store are just some of the reasons Americans have seen their stress levels climb. This stress can manifest itself in a variety of ways, including mood changes, trouble sleeping, and high blood pressure. It can also cause you to grind your teeth—an oral health condition known as bruxism.

Bruxism results when you repeatedly clench and grind your teeth. It can occur either during the day or at night, and the grinding often takes place when you sleep, so you may not even be aware you are doing it. Some common symptoms include waking up with a headache, toothache, or earache. You may also feel tenderness or pain in your face, jaw muscles, and/or teeth or gums. The force from grinding and clenching can cause teeth to crack or fracture, and when the tooth’s enamel is worn away—which happens from the constant rubbing of tooth on tooth—the underlying layer, called dentin, is exposed and can lead to increased tooth sensitivity.

That’s why it’s important that you keep your twice-a-year dental cleanings and checkups and seek care for issues that could become emergencies. If you’re experiencing any symptoms of bruxism, let your dentist

know. During your dental visit, your dentist will be able to detect teeth, fillings, or crowns that are worn down because of grinding and offer you solutions to alleviate your discomfort, such as a mouthguard to be worn while you sleep.

Bruxism isn’t the only stress-related oral health condition plaguing Americans since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. According to the American Dental Association (ADA), dentists are also reporting an increase in prevalence of these oral health conditions:

- Chipped teeth
- Cracked teeth
- Temporomandibular disorder (TMD) symptoms
- Caries (dental decay)
- Periodontal disease

You also will want to adopt some healthy habits to alleviate your stress. Some proven stress management techniques include exercise (both cardio and strength training), yoga, meditation, unplugging from electronic devices, reading a book, or taking a relaxing bath. Quarantining may also be taking a toll on your mental health—especially for those who live alone—so if you’re feeling isolated, try to reach out regularly to friends and family members or set up a weekly Zoom happy hour or other virtual gathering. If you’re still having trouble handling stress, contact your physician for other resources that may be available to you.

Without a doubt, these are incredibly challenging times, but paying attention to your stress levels and how they impact your health—overall, oral, and mental—is one of the best things you can do for yourself.

## With School Sports Seasons in Flux, Mouth Safety Remains a Concern for Young Athletes

**H**igh school sports in Massachusetts have looked a lot different this school year as we continue to navigate the COVID-19 pandemic, and while student-athletes have been forced to make a multitude of adjustments, the Massachusetts Dental Society (MDS) reminds parents, coaches, and athletic directors to make sure that their athletes put in a mouthguard before they put on that face mask.

Many fall sports continued this year with strict guidelines enacted to prevent the virus from spreading, while some sports—football, cheerleading, indoor track, and unified basketball—were postponed until the “Fall II” season, which kicks off in February 2021, per guidelines issued by the Massachusetts Interscholastic Athletic Association. Schools also had the option to skip the season for specific sports, with some programs opting to skip winter sports—which are played indoors and thereby carry a higher risk of infection—entirely. This has led to much uncertainty and inconsistency when it comes to youth and school sports during the pandemic. Will teams get to play? If so, can there be close or direct contact? If inter-team play is not allowed, can the student-athletes still practice or work out as a team?

Despite all the delays and confusion, one certainty remains: Athlete health and safety is at the forefront of all decisions regarding school sports this school year. An athlete is 60 times more likely to suffer harm to the teeth when not wearing a mouthguard, according to the National Youth Sports Safety Foundation. Yet the Massachusetts Department of Public Health Office of Oral Health has reported that about half of Massachusetts middle school students do not wear a mouthguard when playing team sports.

“We’re all aware of the risks of not wearing a [face] mask in public these days, but it is still commonplace to see young athletes putting their mouths, teeth, gums, and lips at risk for serious injury,” says MDS President Dr. MaryJane Hanlon. “This includes athletes participating in sports not typically thought of as ‘full contact’—such as cheerleading, cross-country, and volleyball—because any fall can result in damage to the mouth area.”

Sports injuries involving the mouth can have far-reaching consequences. In addition to any pain and expense in the immediate treatment of a knocked-out tooth or other mouth injury, patients may encounter significant expense with follow-up care—many times greater than the price of a mouthguard—as well as missed school days.

There are three types of mouthguards available: custom-made mouthguard, boil-and-bite mouthguard, and stock mouthguard that one can buy in a sporting goods store. Dentists usually recommend that athletes wear custom-made mouthguards, which are made in two layers: one colored and one clear. During the fabrication process, an athlete’s name can be etched into the mouthguard to ensure identification and eliminate the possibility of cross-contamination.

To learn more about the types of mouthguards available, guidelines for orthodontic patients, and tips for handling mouthguards, please visit [massdental.org/](https://massdental.org/) mouthguards and download the educational *Grin and Wear It®* poster and brochure. You can also ask your dentist for more information.







# USING ANTIBIOTICS WISELY

**A**ntibiotics fight bacterial infections. They can cure many diseases that, in the past, would have made you very sick—maybe even killed you—like tuberculosis. Because antibiotics are so effective, some people want to use them for everything from the common cold to a toothache. But antibiotics don't kill viruses, so they won't help with the common cold, and not every toothache calls for an antibiotic (see "What Can Be Done When Your Tooth Hurts" below).

## HELPING ANTIBIOTICS WORK

### Not All Dental Infections Require Antibiotics

A toothache, for example, might be treated at the site of the infection in the dental office rather than having you take pills at home that won't help fight the infection.

### Use Only When Needed

Talk to your dentist or physician about your symptoms. A fever, for example, can mean that an infection has spread beyond the original site and may respond to antibiotics. An infection that has not spread might be able to be treated at the original site without disturbing the surrounding area.

### Don't Share Medications

Do not share your medicine with others. Antibiotics might not help them feel better, and side effects could occur (like a rash or diarrhea), which could make them feel worse. You should only take antibiotics on the recommendation of a health professional. He or she is trained to recognize the signs of an infection that can be treated with this type of medicine.

## WHAT CAN BE DONE WHEN YOUR TOOTH HURTS

Many things can cause pain when you bite down or eat or drink something hot or cold. Your tooth may even hurt when you do nothing at all! Causes of tooth pain include:

- Injuries
- Swelling of the tissues in or around your tooth
- Bacterial infections in or around the tooth

Injuries or swelling that cause pain without other symptoms may feel better if you take pain relievers (like aspirin or ibuprofen) or use hot or cold packs. In some cases, your dentist might recommend a root canal or other dental treatment.

Antibiotics, though, should only be taken when prescribed by a health professional. Fever, swollen glands, and extreme tiredness are signs that antibiotics might be the right choice.



## RISKS OF ANTIBIOTIC USE

### Side Effects

Antibiotics can have side effects, including:

- Diarrhea, from short bouts lasting less than a day to more severe cases caused by *Clostridioides difficile* (or *C. diff*), which may require care in a hospital and could be deadly, especially for older adults
- Yeast infections
- Nausea or vomiting

Some people are allergic to certain antibiotics. They may develop a rash or have a more severe, even life-threatening reaction.

### Antibiotic Resistance

When bacteria are antibiotic resistant, they are no longer killed by the antibiotics. This can occur naturally, as bacteria multiply on their own or as a result of being exposed to antibiotics. This can happen when you use antibiotics improperly (for example, taking antibiotics when not needed). When bacteria are resistant to antibiotics, they can grow quickly, causing illnesses that are difficult—sometimes impossible—to treat.

Antibiotic-resistant bacteria can spread from one person to another, affecting the whole community.

## CONCLUSION

Antibiotics are helpful medications, and we must use them wisely to ensure that they will continue to work against bacterial infections.

*Prepared by Anita M. Mark, senior scientific content specialist at the American Dental Association (ADA) Science & Research Institute in Chicago, IL. This article originally appeared in the November 2019 (Vol. 150, No. 11) issue of the Journal of the American Dental Association. Copyright © 2019 ADA. It is reprinted with permission.*



**A**ttitudes and habits established at an early age are critical to maintaining good oral health throughout life. Dental decay is the single-most-common chronic childhood disease in the United States. But with good nutrition, proper care, and regular dental visits, children can maintain healthy mouths—and healthy smiles. To help promote the benefits of establishing good oral health habits at an early age, the Massachusetts Dental Society (MDS) offers parents and caregivers these five tips:

1. Oral health care should start from day one. It is essential to begin oral health care as soon as your baby is born. Clean his or her gums gently with a clean gauze pad or washcloth after each feeding. Parents should brush their baby's teeth gently with a soft-bristled toothbrush and a small amount of water as soon as the first tooth appears, typically between six months and one year.
2. Children's teeth should be brushed for two minutes, at least twice a day. While it's okay to let your child "take a turn," parents or caregivers should do the actual brushing until the child's manual dexterity is good enough to do an effective job in removing all plaque on the teeth. Use a fluoridated toothpaste and a soft-bristled toothbrush (but don't use fluoride toothpaste on a child until he or she can spit). There are toothbrushing apps available for your smartphone or tablet that can help keep kids motivated about brushing and ensure they brush for a full two minutes. Flossing also is necessary to remove food particles and plaque that build up between teeth, and it should occur as soon as the teeth are close together and any two are touching, which usually occurs by age four. Using a smooth-coated, mint-flavored floss will appeal more to young mouths.
3. Certain foods and drinks can affect children's teeth more than others. Sticky candy and snacks like gummy worms, licorice, fruit snacks, and even raisins have a high sugar content and are the worst offenders when it comes to causing tooth decay, otherwise

# FIVE TIPS

## to Improve Your Child's Oral Health

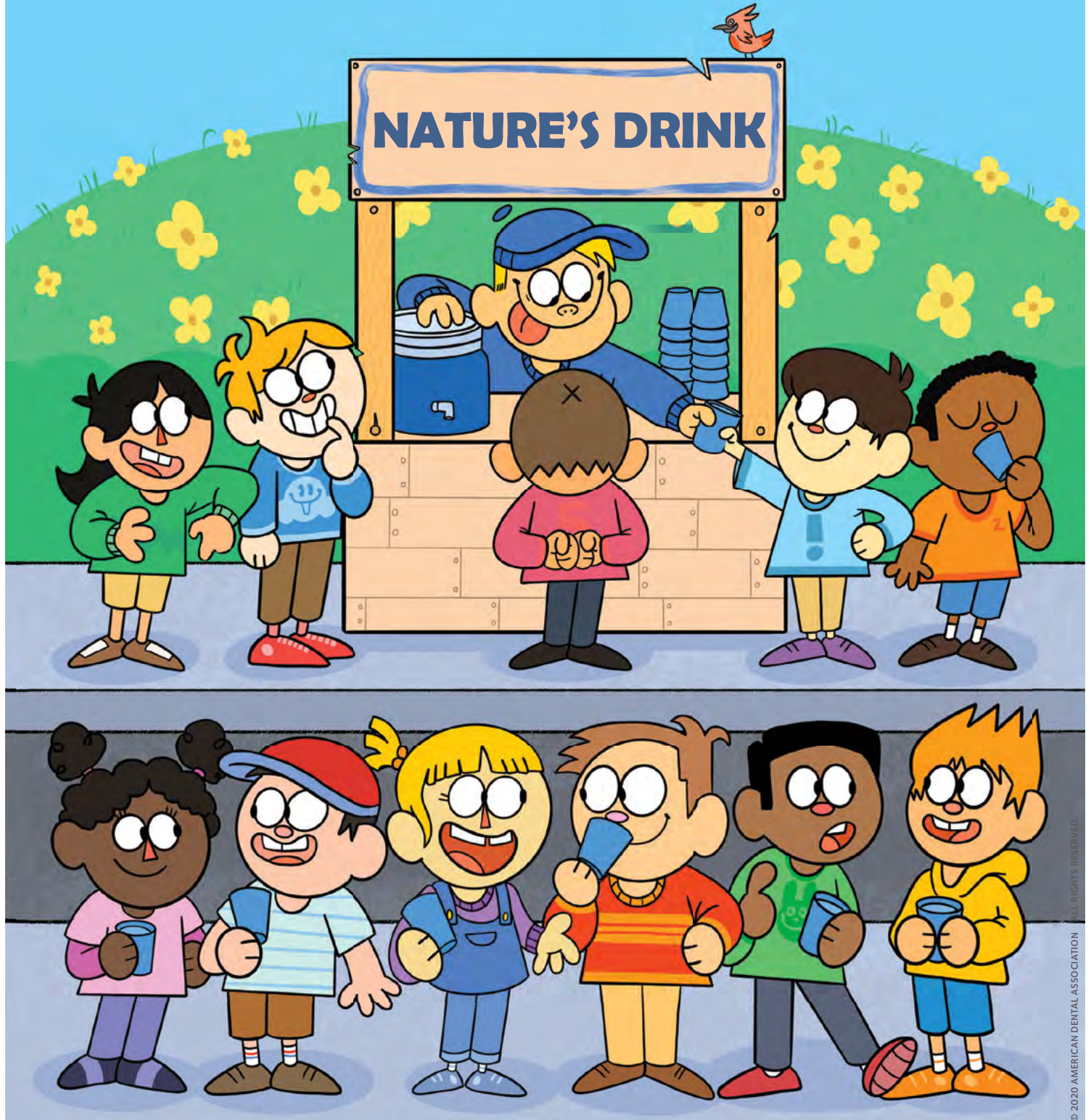
known as cavities. Excessive consumption of soda, juice, and sweetened sports drinks can also cause decay. Instead, children should drink water or milk. Drinking fluoridated water from the tap is especially helpful for preventing cavities because fluoride makes the outer surface of teeth more resistant to the acid attacks that cause tooth decay. Studies show that children who drink fluoridated water as their teeth grow will have stronger, more decay-resistant teeth over their lifetime.

4. Be mindful of the oral implications of pacifier use and thumb sucking. These are common habits and a normal, soothing reflex for babies and toddlers. Most children will stop sucking their thumb between the ages of two and four, and typically no harm is done to their teeth or jaws. However, some children who repeatedly suck on a finger or a pacifier for long periods of time may push their upper front teeth toward their lip or cause their front teeth to not come in properly. To encourage kids to stop, try positive measures, such as praising them or rewarding them with small, non-food goodies like stickers. Negative reinforcement or constant nagging by parents can have the opposite effect.
5. Regular dental visits will help avoid potential problems. Dental visits are very important to ensure that children's teeth are coming in properly and do not show signs of decay. Children should visit the dentist for an examination and cleaning every six months to avoid potential problems. The American Dental Association, the Academy of Pediatric Dentistry, and the American Academy of Pediatrics all recommend that a child's first visit to the dentist should be six months after the eruption of the first tooth or by the age of one.

Visit [massdental.org/baby-oral-health](https://massdental.org/baby-oral-health) to download *The Mouths of Babies* brochure and visit the MDS YouTube channel ([youtube.com/massdentalsociety](https://youtube.com/massdentalsociety)) to view short, educational videos on first dental visits and children's brushing and flossing.



# WATER



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February is National Children's Dental Health Month. Visit [ADA.org/NCDHM2021](https://ada.org/NCDHM2021) for activity sheets.

## 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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