How to Be a Better Flosser

Flossing—beyond just clearing out the spinach from those eggs Florentine lingering between the molars—aids in gum health and good breath. New research shows flossing may even protect against diabetes and preterm births.

But there is little literature on flossing's finer points, says Denis F. Kinane, professor of pathology and periodontics at the University of Pennsylvania's Penn Dental Medicine. "It's kind of like grandmother and apple pie. We know flossing is beneficial, but no one has even studied if it's better to floss in the morning or evening." We asked him to resolve some common household debates about flossing.

Brush, Floss, Rinse: For optimal mouth cleaning, Denis F. Kinane, professor of pathology and periodontics at the University of Pennsylvania's Penn Dental Medicine, recommends a bedtime regimen of brushing, flossing and rinsing, to give the mouth an 'eight-hour, food-free rest.' Repeating in the morning is useful, too, he says.

Is it better to floss first or brush first?

The typical regime would be brushing, flossing and rinsing. Flossing cleans out places where the toothbrush can't reach. But if you were on a desert island and could only bring one dental-health item, choose a toothbrush.

What about morning versus evening?

Your teeth are typically covered in microbial plaque, or biofilm, which is understood to be linked to every disease caused by infection, from strep and on.

A flossing lesson

When you should remove that plaque depends on why you're removing it in the first place. If you are removing it for prevention of tooth decay or periodontal disease—such as gingivitis, which destroys the root and makes the teeth fall out—then I believe it's best at night. This gives you an eight-hour, food-free rest so your mouth can fight against the ravages it faces all day.

If you floss in the morning, because you have to say hello to people and want nice teeth, that is useful—but less so from a biological point of view. Although it should be noted that this has never been researched—call it the Kinane Hypothesis.

What is biggest flossing mistake?

Sawing back and forward is wrong; that can abrade the tooth, create a groove and eventually saw off the crown.

You should always introduce the floss at the top of the tooth, in the gum line, and bring it down, then remove it and find an unused length for the next tooth.

The old piece of floss is fully laden with plaque. You wouldn't want to use it again and spread those germs. And be gentle: If you're too rough, you can cut into the gum and cause bleeding or even a soft-tissue wound over time. We also see a lot of what we call "oral health athletes," who are overzealous about flossing. Once a day is plenty.

Do any other tools—water picks, harps—work better than floss?

Harps can be fast, and water picks are easier to use on crowns, but a basic cheap floss is perfect.

Waxed versus unwaxed? Ribbon versus string?

This is really a matter of personal preference. The waxed surface helps the floss to slip in and slip out, which most people like. The string floss can cut your fingers if they are dry; the ribbon has a larger surface area to reach more of the tooth. The popular brand Glide is actually PTFE, or Teflon, so it is slip-free, and because it's actually in a ribbon form, it has good contact with the tooth.

Doesn't vigorous water rinsing do the same job?

You cannot get in between the teeth well with anything other than floss. Your mouth gets a lot of bacteria on various surfaces, which can recolonize clean areas. So while mouth washes are great for killing remnant bacteria on all surfaces, you have to get between the teeth with the ancient invention called floss to really reach every spot.

— Heidi Mitchell Printed in The Wall Street Journal, page 29