

Toothbrush care, cleaning and replacement

Proper toothbrush care is important to your oral health. Because a worn toothbrush is less effective in cleaning, the American Dental Association recommends replacing your toothbrush every three to four months or sooner if the bristles become frayed. Children's toothbrushes often need to be replaced more frequently.

BACTERIA AND TOOTHBRUSHES

You may have heard talk about bacterial contamination of toothbrushes and wondered if it is cause for concern. The mouth harbors hundreds of different types of microorganisms (germs), some of which are transferred to a toothbrush during use. Microorganisms in the environment also may become established on a stored toothbrush. Toothbrushes may have bacteria on them right out of the box, because they are not required to be sold in a sterile package. However, the human body is constantly exposed to potentially harmful microbes, and it usually can defend itself against germs and prevent infections.

Although studies have shown that various microorganisms can grow on toothbrushes after use, evidence is lacking that bacterial growth on toothbrushes will lead to specific health problems.

There is no clinical evidence that soaking a toothbrush in an antibacterial mouthrinse or using a commercially available toothbrush sanitizer has any positive or negative effect on health. Some cleaning methods, including use of a dishwasher or microwave oven, could damage the brush.

Here are some common-sense things you can do:

- don't share toothbrushes;
- thoroughly rinse the toothbrush with tap water after use to remove any toothpaste and debris;

- store the toothbrush in an upright position if possible and allow it to air-dry. When storing more than one brush, keep them separated so that germs are not transferred from one brush to another.

Don't routinely cover or store toothbrushes in closed containers. A moist environment helps the growth of most germs.

TOOTHBRUSH SANITIZERS

Toothbrush sanitizers have not been shown to provide a health benefit. If a consumer chooses to use one of these devices, the ADA's Council on Scientific Affairs recommends that he or she select one cleared by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA).

Manufacturers of FDA-cleared products must provide the agency with information to support their marketing claims. Below are examples of FDA-cleared claims for toothbrush sanitizers on the market today.

- The product is designed to sanitize* toothbrushes.
- The product is intended for use in reducing bacterial contamination that accumulates naturally on toothbrushes.

Claims that go beyond sanitizing the toothbrush or reducing bacterial contamination should be viewed critically. Read the complete Council on Scientific Affairs' statement on toothbrush care at the ADA's Web site at "www.ada.org/prof/resources/positions/statements/toothbrush.asp". ■

* Manufacturers typically will test the "germ-kill" level of their product using specific types of bacteria. The types of bacteria tested may not be the same for each company and product. "Sanitization" means that 99.9 percent of the tested germs are killed. No commercially available toothbrush cleaning products have been shown to sterilize toothbrushes. "Sterilize" means to kill all germs and spores.

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