

# Ask Dr. Huff....Why do I need to come in for a cleaning instead of just brushing them really well myself?



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A good friend of mine asked me this question just the other day. It's worth writing about because he voiced the same question that many think but don't express.

Quite frankly, this is not an unreasonable question because unless you're in the dental profession, most people don't understand the skills that are involved a professional dental "cleaning" and that they are necessary to treat and prevent site-specific dental disease.

Dentists, dental hygienists, television, radio, and the internet are doing a terrific job at educating the public about the importance of good home dental hygiene. Almost all of our patients today know what a toothbrush is, have at least heard

that soft brushes are best, have entertained the thought of purchasing an electric toothbrush, and have a working knowledge of many of the commercially available toothpastes and mouthwashes on the market! This is in stark contrast to dentistry of 20 years ago or so when many people did not know that they need to brush at least once daily. Despite this overwhelming education of the lay public, the media does a relatively poor job of describing the importance of professional dental hygiene visits in removing the bacteria and tartar that can't be seen in the bathroom mirror and in identifying obstacles to proper home hygiene practices.

Dental plaque is comprised of secretions from the normal flora of the mouth that is necessary for healthy digestion of food. It develops daily and clings to rough areas of teeth, around restoration margins, and between the roots of susceptible teeth. Plaque is the culprit in the development of

inflammation of the gums and tooth decay. Since plaque is very tenacious and sticky, it cannot be removed without mechanical debridement. Proper toothbrushing does an adequate job in removing plaque from easily accessible areas, and efficient thorough flossing can provide reasonable plaque removal in between the teeth. The problem is that nobody, including even dentists, brushes and flosses perfectly on a routine basis. In fact, we see some bleeding points on routine exam in even the best and most compliant hygiene patients.

Since we know that healthy gums don't bleed, and that it takes 14 days of irritation by plaque to cause bleeding, clear evidence exists that regular professional dental cleanings are necessary to remove plaque from those areas where toothbrush bristles don't reach. We also know from research studies that professional dental cleanings at no greater intervals than 90 days, even in the absence of home brushing and

flossing, can control periodontal disease because it takes that long for bacteria to colonize in periodontal pockets. So, in actuality, it would be ideal for people to have their teeth cleaned every three months on a regular basis for the best prevention of dental disease. In fact, most of our patients who have made significant financial investments in their dental health request regular 3-month recare appointments. Ironically, the concept of the "6-month check-up" was introduced sometime in the 1960's by the makers of a popular toothpaste and was seized by the insurance industry as a limitation for cost control; it never has had any scientific rationale.

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