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Health



# **AARP Smart Guide: Tips for a Healthy Smile**

How keeping your teeth, gums and mouth in good shape affects your overall health

by Robin Roenker, **AARP Members Only Access (/benefits-discounts/members-only-access/)**, January 31, 2023



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Good oral health matters for a healthy smile, but it's also essential for overall wellness.

Research suggests periodontal disease may play a role in the development or severity of cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes, rheumatoid arthritis, inflammatory bowel disease, Alzheimer's disease and other forms of dementia, and even some cancers.

While these links are still being explored, their root cause may be the body's response to inflammation. "In disease status, especially with inflammation [as is found in periodontal disease], the body has certain inflammatory markers that are circulating throughout the system ... [so] other areas of the body may also result in that [same] type of destructive response," explains Theresa Wang, a prosthodontist and vice president of clinical innovation with ClearChoice Dental Implant Centers in Schaumburg, Illinois.

While it's not clear that gum disease directly causes these other conditions, "the suspicion in medicine and dentistry is that when [these health conditions and gum disease] exist together, they oftentimes kind of fuel each other's severity," Wang says.

Want to make sure you're doing all you can to preserve your pearly whites and reduce your risk of disease? Here's how.

## START WITH THE BASICS

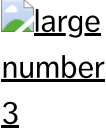
### 1. Visit the dentist regularly — or as needed

Generally, you should get an oral health checkup and teeth cleaning at least once a year, or, even better, every six months. And some insurance plans allow for up to three yearly professional teeth cleanings. But if you have gum disease, diabetes or cardiovascular disease, you might be instructed to visit more often. Find a dentist you feel comfortable with, so going in for regular checkups isn't something you dread. "I encourage patients to get into their dentist's office on a regular basis," says dentist Arwinder Judge, chief clinical officer at Aspen Dental in Naples, Florida. "It's one of the most important things you can do for your oral health." Seeing a dentist two or more times a year may lower your risk of mortality from all causes by 30 to 50 percent, according to a *Journal of Aging Research* study.

### 2. Address anxiety

Many people experience anxiety at the dentist and it can prevent us from seeking health care. Olga Krikunenko, dentist and owner of Mint Dental in Franklin, Massachusetts, shares this advice: "To help with fear it's important to understand what exactly the patient is afraid of and tailor their care around that," she says. "We encourage patients to bring things of comfort to their appointments or we provide headphones and movies to watch. But to relieve stress and anxiety we also prescribe medications based on patients' needs to help calm their nerves before procedures. Additionally, some offices can do treatment under sedation for certain circumstances. But ultimately, the longer you don't go to the dentist the more treatment may be needed, and that will in itself cause people to have anxiety about going. So it's a matter of breaking the cycle and not delaying care." If your fear is still preventing you from visiting the dentist, find a good therapist you can talk to about the issue.

### Brush twice a day for two minutes

 The American Dental Association (ADA) has long recommended brushing your teeth twice a day, two full minutes each time. Establishing a regular time of day for both will help make it a habit. Dental professionals say before breakfast and before bed are the best times to brush. And toss that manual toothbrush if you've had it longer than three months — the maximum time you should use a toothbrush.

## 4. Wait 30 minutes to brush

The reason the tip above recommends before breakfast and not after is so you give your teeth enamel time to remineralize and build itself back up again. Wait at least a half hour instead of brushing right after a meal, especially if you ate something acidic, so you don't damage your tooth enamel.

## 5. Brush at a 45-degree angle

If you're brushing with your toothbrush held at a 90-degree angle to your teeth, you're doing it wrong. Instead, place your brush at a 45-degree angle, advises Melissa Torres, a cosmetic dentist based in Reading, Massachusetts. Holding your brush with this slight tilt will help you more effectively remove plaque and bacteria along the gum line.

## 6. Use small circles

Brush in small circles from top to bottom on each tooth, rather than using broad, back and forth, horizontal movements. "Brushing back and forth can actually make the gums recede a little bit," explains Alex J. Delgado, associate professor and director of continuing dental education at the University of Florida College of Dentistry.

## 7. Switch to your nondominant hand when brushing

If your gum line is receding, switch periodically to brushing with your nondominant hand. Doing so will result in using less pressure against your gums. This exercise also has a neurological benefit: Using your nondominant hand challenges your brain, and can lead to better memory and concentration.

## 8. Be gentle

Always opt for a soft bristle or extra soft bristle toothbrush. "You should never ever use a hard toothbrush," says Bill Dorfman, a Los Angeles-based cosmetic dentist and author of the book *Billion Dollar Smile: A Complete Guide to Your Extreme Smile Makeover* (2006). "Years and years of brushing with a hard toothbrush will brush away your gums and cause attrition of the enamel on the front surface of your teeth," he adds. Torres agrees, recommending patients always use an extra-soft or soft-bristle toothbrush, which, she says, will "be gentle enough that it's not going to cause any harm to the gum tissue, but still abrasive enough to remove the plaque and bacteria off the teeth."

## 9. Go electric

Research suggests powered toothbrushes are more effective at removing plaque than traditional manual ones. “When you automate how the individual bristles actually work, it imparts an energy into the saliva that creates millions of little bubbles — so in essence you can interrupt bacteria even beyond where the bristles touch the tooth,” notes Tim Donley, a periodontist who practices in Bowling Green, Kentucky. Krikunenko recommends using a plug-in rechargeable electric rather than battery-operated oscillating toothbrushes, which are typically not as powerful.

## 10. Get smart

If it fits your budget, Donley recommends looking for electric toothbrushes that (<https://www.documents.philips.com/assets/20211224/563c44e209084209bc19ae0801087c0a.pdf>) incorporate artificial intelligence and utilize apps to alert you if you’re using an incorrect amount of brushing pressure or if you’ve missed certain spots entirely. The Philips Sonicare 9900 Prestige

(\$379.96) claims to adjust in real time to your brushing, while the Oral-B Genius X Limited Electronic Toothbrush (\$199.99) uses artificial intelligence to instantly recognize your brushing style. The BLU Smart Toothbrush and App (\$99.99) features a cavity tracker for each tooth. A few less expensive brushes include the Oral-B Pro 1000 Rechargeable Electric Toothbrush (\$49.99) and Quip’s Smart Electric Toothbrush (\$50), which shares coaching tips through its app.

## 11. Floss every day

There’s a reason your dentist asks at each visit if you’ve been flossing — because when you don’t, bacteria, plaque and tartar along your gumline irritates and inflames your gums and can lead to bleeding when you do floss. “Flossing is really, really important, especially in between the teeth where plaque will sit, because toothbrush bristles simply can’t get that far in,” says Krikunenko. Flossing well is associated with lower levels of gum disease. Ideally you should floss when you brush your teeth, but at the very least floss before you go to bed. If you see blood when you floss, that’s an indicator you need to ramp up your flossing. The more you floss, the less you may bleed and the better your oral health will be. “Spend the time to floss between the teeth,” says David Frank, owner and founder of Walden Dental in Austin, Texas. “Approach flossing as you would if you’re towel drying your back, rubbing the floss forward and backward like a saw to go gently into the gum line in order to remove the tartar and plaque and bacteria that get stuck between the gums and the roots of your teeth.” Cutting back on sugary foods and drinks and addressing dry mouth symptoms can also help reduce your risk of developing cavities.

## 12. And floss effectively

Floss picks or string? Waxed or unwaxed? While using floss picks is better than not flossing at all, they’re

not as effective as string. In addition to adding more plastic into the environment, they can spread bacteria from one location to another. It's better to use string floss so you can wrap around teeth and move down the string so each tooth has a fresh area. And opt for thicker, more rigid floss rather than a slick, thin floss. Also, rather than simply flossing in vertical up-and-down motions between each tooth, take the time to floss lower, along the grooves of your gum line. "If you think of your teeth coming together with the gums in the middle forming a little V, you want to go down each side of that V," says Krikunenko. Unwaxed or waxed, flavored or not — that's up to you! "It's about incorporating whatever works for your routine and whatever you're going to be willing to actually do every day. That's the key," says Wang.

## 13. Eat to banish plaque

If your gums bleed when you brush, it usually means there is plaque buildup on teeth that is inflaming the gum. Eating hard, crunchy foods such as carrots, nuts and seeds help slough off plaque.

## 14. Try a water flosser

Among professional dentists, you'll see some debate about whether water flossers are an effective substitute for traditional flossing. Donley opts for water power: "I have not used string floss in 20 years, but I have been wonderfully effective in cleaning in between my teeth using a water flosser," he says. Meanwhile, Dorfman argues that "water flossers are good at removing some debris, but they do not replace flossing in any way, shape or form." Consider trying a water flosser if you have mobility issues that make traditional flossing challenging, or if you are simply drawn to their convenience. The American Dental Hygienists' Association recommends a unit that delivers water pressure of 50 to 90 psi, a level that both healthy and inflamed gum tissue can withstand without damage.

## 15. Use toothpaste with fluoride

Certain foods and beverages — particularly acidic ones such as sodas, sports drinks and even fruit juices — can cause tooth enamel to demineralize and erode over time. Choosing a toothpaste with fluoride is "essential, even for adults, because fluoride is the key for remineralization of tooth enamel," Torres says. Always choose a toothpaste brand that is approved by the ADA, so you can be assured it's safe and effective. Fluoride toothpaste can also help remineralize and strengthen tooth enamel.

## 16. Keep your toothpaste in the tube

Some social media influencers have started putting their toothpaste into clear or near-clear pump dispensers in order to give their bathrooms a more clean-looking aesthetic. But dental professionals warn against this trend — the reason toothpaste is in a tube is because toothpaste is UV-reactive and becomes less effective when exposed to light. It can also break down the preservative ingredients and possibly even lead to bacterial and fungal growth.



## Rinse with the right mouthwash



17.

Have you avoided mouth rinses because you can't stand their burn? Good news: You can skip alcohol-based mouthwashes, which can be overpowering and may even dry out your mouth.

Krikunenکو recommends ADA-approved alcohol-free mouth rinses with fluoride and targeted ingredients to reduce plaque and promote gum health. Look for ones that include CPC, or cetylpyridium chloride, which reduces bacteria in the mouth. A few to consider: Crest Pro-Health Multi-Protection CPC Antigingivitis/Antiplaque Mouthwash (\$5.99), Colgate Enamel Health Mouthwash (\$5.99) and Listerine Total Care Alcohol-Free Anticavity Mouthwash (\$7.99).

18.

## Rinse at the right time

Don't use any mouthwash — even fluoride — right after you brush. You'll wash away all the concentrated fluoride that any toothpaste left on your teeth. Instead choose a separate time to rinse, like after lunch or dinner.



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## BE PROACTIVE

**Deal with pain immediately**



large number 19

If you have minor tooth pain, don't wait until it becomes unbearable to finally get it checked. "A delay in addressing tooth pain can ultimately make the experience of getting it repaired less than wonderful," Donley says.

## 20. Stop smoking

There are multiple reasons to stop smoking. Smoking or using other tobacco products is a leading factor in the development of gum disease, which, left unchecked, can cause permanent tooth loss. It also increases your risk of developing certain oral cancers. More than 60 percent of oral cancers are directly linked to smoking, according to the Oral Health Foundation, and smokers, in general, are up to 10 times more likely to develop oral cancer than never-smokers. Smoking and using tobacco products can lead to significant staining of your teeth — even vaping and using electronic cigarettes can leave stains. So kick the tobacco habit for good, not only for your smile's sake, but for your overall health.

## 21. Reduce staining

Other primary teeth staining culprits include red wine, coffee, tea, dark colas and foods like berries that are darkly pigmented. "Teeth are a little bit porous. So over time, there's a cumulative effect [of staining], so teeth tend to get darker and darker with age," explains Dorfman. If preventing stains is a primary focus, it's best to consume these high-stain foods and beverages in moderation — or simply make it a habit to rinse your mouth out with a glass of water after enjoying them to reduce their staining potential. You can also eat more cauliflower, spinach, lettuce and broccoli, which are all sources of minerals that create a protective film.

## 22. Slow enamel loss

The outer layer of our teeth is covered in enamel, a tough protective substance that defends our teeth from erosion. "You can think of enamel like a hard, tough barrier," Wang says. "But once it's worn down, it exposes the internal dentin of the tooth, which is more susceptible to sensitivity and pain." If you've experienced tooth staining or sensitivity, you've had a loss due to erosion. While saliva neutralizes the acidity in foods, if you don't brush your teeth or rinse after, it can lead to erosion. Avoiding or limiting sugary, starchy, acidic and foods high in vitamin C can help maintain that barrier.

## 23. Don't ignore tooth sensitivity

If your teeth feel sensitive to cold or hot foods or beverages, or you notice pain while brushing, talk with your dentist about possible solutions. "Sensitive teeth are typically the result of worn-down tooth enamel or exposed tooth roots, but sensitivity can also be caused by other factors, such as a cavity, a cracked or chipped tooth, a worn-down filling or gum disease," says Anabella Oquendo Parilli, assistant dean for international programs and clinical assistant professor of cariology and

comprehensive care at the NYU College of Dentistry. Depending on the source of your tooth pain, your

dentist may suggest trying an over-the-counter toothpaste meant to decrease sensitivity, or prescribe an in-office fluoride application to strengthen tooth enamel. More extreme cases may [\(https://smilowfamilydentistry.com/blog/how-dental-bonding-can-help-sensitive-teeth/\)](https://smilowfamilydentistry.com/blog/how-dental-bonding-can-help-sensitive-teeth/) call for applying bonding resin to cover sensitive areas. “If you’re having tooth sensitivity, don’t ignore it,” advises Judge. “Talk with your dentist and have them take a look at it.”

## 24. Prevent bruxism from further damaging teeth

Bruxism, or teeth grinding, is relatively common. Estimates suggest more than one in 10 adults grind their teeth in their sleep, and one in three do so during the day from time to time. Many people, though, don’t realize the extent of their grinding until they look back at photos of themselves from decades ago. “If you feel like, wow, my teeth are a lot shorter now than they used to be — it could be a sign that you’re grinding your teeth,” adds Frank. To prevent further damage to your teeth, you could try an  [\(https://www.amazon.com/Oral-B-Nighttime-Dental-Scope-Professional/dp/B0170BHYGE\)](https://www.amazon.com/Oral-B-Nighttime-Dental-Scope-Professional/dp/B0170BHYGE) over-the-counter mouthguard, but for best results, Krikunenko recommends working with a dentist who can identify your specific bite challenges in order to fit you with a mouth guard more precisely, though that’s going to run you anywhere from \$200 to \$1,000. “Oftentimes, if patients are grinding their teeth, they’ll go to the drugstore and get a boil and bite guard, only to come back with more problems and pain after wearing it,” she says. “With a custom bite guard, we monitor it, we make sure that the patient is biting evenly and that their jaw is supported in the right position when they’re wearing it.”

## 25. Chew sugarless gum

If you enjoy chewing gum, make it sugarless. Your habit may actually help prevent tooth decay, research suggests. Gum-chewing for 20 minutes following a meal can increase saliva production in your mouth, helping to wash away food particles and bacteria that could lead to cavities if allowed to deposit between teeth. Always look for a gum that’s ADA-approved, so you can be sure it’s actually sugar-free. Additionally, there’s evidence that chewing gum with the sweetener xylitol in it can help prevent the formation of plaque, and it may slow bacterial growth associated with cavities and have other benefits. But consume carefully: In high amounts xylitol has been shown to lead to side effects such as irritable bowel syndrome and diarrhea.

## 26. Reevaluate your diet

We know that certain foods and beverages cause tooth erosion. Those same items — and others — can also result in cavities: permanently damaged areas in the hard surface of your teeth that develop into tiny openings or holes and require repair. When not fixed, cavities can lead to pain, chewing problems and tooth abscesses. Sour candy, bread, carbonated drinks, alcohol, potato chips, citrus, dried fruit and even ice chips can lead to cavities. So after eating or drinking, especially anything on this list, rinse your mouth and brush your teeth 30 minutes after.





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## DENTAL REPAIR

### 27. Address cavities

If you have a cavity, your dentist will likely recommend a dental filling. Without treatment, cavities can become larger and eventually affect deeper layers of your teeth. “To treat a cavity, your dentist will remove the decayed portion of the tooth and then fill that area where the decayed material was removed,” explains Oquendo Parilli. Modern fillings can be made from gold, porcelain, silver amalgam, tooth-colored plastic or resin. Oquendo Parilli suggests talking with your dentist to determine the right filling type for the location and extent of your tooth damage — as well as your budget.

### 28. Know when to save a tooth versus pull it

If you have significant tooth decay, your dentist will discuss whether repairing and saving the tooth is still possible. “Any time you can hold on to the tooth, that’s best,” says Frank. “Even if it appears a large chunk of the tooth is broken down, there is still a lot of root left underneath the gums and into the bone.” If your tooth has enough material left to effectively grip to the filling, a dental crown or other restoration procedure, it may be able to be saved.

## When to consider implants



[number 29](#)

If your tooth must be pulled — or if you want to address previously existing tooth loss — a dental implant is one option to restore your smile and ability to chew normally. Dental implants include a screw-like base typically made of titanium or zirconia, which is surgically implanted in the jaw. The base is then covered by a prosthetic tooth — often using a porcelain or ceramic crown — that’s made to match the color of your surrounding teeth. Implants can replace a single tooth, multiple teeth or even all of your teeth. Dental implants are meant to be a permanent replacement for missing teeth. But they can be pricey, with implant estimates ranging from roughly \$3,000 to nearly \$6,000 for a single tooth replacement.

## 30. When to consider veneers

If you’re looking for a way to upgrade the look of chipped, cracked, misshapen or discolored teeth, ask your dentist if you could be a candidate for dental veneers — a thin tooth-colored shell that attaches to the front of your teeth to cosmetically improve their appearance. Dental veneers “get bonded right on the front of the tooth. And they can change the color, the shape, the size and sometimes even the length of the tooth,” Oquendo Parilli explains. A single-tooth porcelain

veneer, which may cost between \$925 and \$2,500, can be expected to last 10 to 15 years. Less expensive composite resin veneers, which run around \$250 to \$1,500 per tooth, last roughly five to seven years.

## 31. Look into modern dentures

If you need to replace all of your teeth, dentures may be your most affordable option. Many providers now offer 3D dentures, which are created using a digital scan of your mouth and 3D printers — either in the dentist’s office or in a lab. Traditional dentures can require as many as five office visits due to lag time between creating a mold of your mouth and then eventual, multiple fittings. In contrast, 3D dentures may require only two appointments. Still, it’s smart to explore pricing, durability and product life-expectancy ranges for both traditional, milled dentures and 3D-printed dentures when you’re considering this step. (Traditional dentures typically range between \$1,000 and \$3,000 per set.)

## 32. Ask for a treatment plan

If your dental office is recommending a lot of work, ask for a treatment plan. This should detail cost, cost after insurance, a timeline and everything that will be fixed. If you don’t understand specific terms, ask or look them up and make sure you understand everything, from what is urgent to what can be put off for a while.

## 33. Get a second, or third, opinion

If the estimated bill for dental work is shockingly high, or you see a new dentist who suddenly recommends a bevy of work, get at least one more opinion. These are red flags that you should question, and it’s so common that many dentists offer first-time customers a no-cost “second

opinion” deal where you can be seen and get an estimate. When you do find a dentist who can offer another opinion, have your previous dental office forward any records or X-rays.

## 34. Combine coverage

In some cases, you can use dual dental plans to lower your costs. This typically happens when you have two jobs that provide dental care that you use or a spouse that has a separate dental plan that you can pair with your own. If you’re on Medicare, some Medicare Advantage plans can be paired with another dental insurance plan. You’ll still pay your monthly premiums, but the lowered cost of dental work may make it worthwhile. In either case, run the numbers and talk to your dentist about the best course of action.



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## A HEALTHY MOUTH

### 35. Clean your tongue

Brush or scrape your tongue — either with your regular toothbrush or a dedicated tongue cleaner — each time you brush your teeth, Delgado recommends. Start with the back of the tongue and brush or scrape toward the front. “If you don’t brush your tongue, the surface can accumulate food particles, bacteria and plaque,” he says. This buildup can cause inflammation in the papillae, the naturally occurring protrusions that give the tongue its rough surface, and lead to temporary staining of the tongue. Most patchy tongue discolorations are harmless and clear up on their own with good oral hygiene.

## 36. Check for irregularities

If, however, you have patchy white discoloration, bumps, sores or other tongue irregularities that do not clear up within two weeks, head to your dentist to have them checked. “Most minor sores, like a canker sore, will go away within 10 to 14 days, so I always tell patients, ‘If it’s not gone within two weeks, I need to see you,’” says Krikunenko. Creamy white patches could be a sign of oral thrush, a fungal infection that frequently affects older adults with diabetes or who wear dentures. And tongue bumps, ulcers or sores that aren’t healing on their own should be screened by a professional skilled in detecting oral cancer.

## 37. Look for lumps

While you should ask your dentist to do a professional screening for early signs of mouth cancer at least once a year, the Mouth Cancer Foundation also recommends doing an at-home, two-minute self-check for signs of oral cancer at least once a month. “Oral cancer is on the rise,” says Judge. “If you’re noticing any kind of swelling or any kind of lumps that’s lasting more than 10 or 12 days or so, you want to make sure that you get into the doctor or dentist to have it evaluated.”

## 38. Avoid gum disease

Periodontal disease — called gingivitis in its early stages — is a severe infection of the gums that can cause damage to gum tissue and, eventually, tooth loss. The condition is extremely common. In fact, “Fifty percent of U.S. adults have some form of periodontal disease, and adults 65 and older have a 70 percent chance of having periodontal disease,” says Wang. Gum tissue can’t regenerate after it’s damaged, so the key is to catch and reverse gum disease early, or avoid it altogether. Proper brushing and flossing, avoidance of an over-sugary diet and routine dentist visits are essential tools in combating periodontal disease.

## 39. Understand options for damaged gums

If gum tissue is damaged, there are medical interventions that can help stop the progression of gum disease. For example, your dentist may recommend tooth scaling and root planing to remove plaque below the gum line in order to reduce the risk of gum and tooth loss. More severe cases of gum regression might require gum graft surgery. In this surgical procedure, a periodontist — a dentist specializing in prevention and treatment of gum disease — will remove healthy gum tissue from elsewhere in your mouth and graft it on the area needing repair.



## 40. Tackle bad breath

The occasional bad breath is embarrassing and can affect almost everyone from time to time. For occasional bad breath, chewing some herbs can naturally freshen your breath, including mint and parsley, which kill bacteria in the mouth. Plus, they contain monoterpenes, substances that move rapidly through the bloodstream to your lungs to counter the odor in your mouth. But if you have chronic bad breath, also known as halitosis, you shouldn't ignore it. Generally, bad breath comes from food and plaque that sits on the teeth and around the gums and is not cleaned away, notes Krikunenko. Products that help with removing plaque and tartar from teeth and gums will help keep bad breath at bay, but "Ultimately it comes down to how often you brush and floss your teeth and come in for regular cleanings," she adds. If you've tried these, your halitosis could be a sign of dry mouth, periodontal disease, poor oral hygiene or even a condition like acid reflux. While over-the-counter mouth rinses may help reduce symptoms, the only way to find the root cause of halitosis is to be seen by a professional. "I recommend patients with halitosis go through a full dental exam, because it could be a sign of a periodontal condition. For example, you may have lost bone and you've now got this tartar that's built up around the roots of your teeth," Judge says. "In other cases, it could be the result of something else, like acid reflux. So sometimes it takes a combined approach between oral health and other health care professionals to address the problem."

## 41. Reconsider sharing

Did you know that cavity-causing bacteria can be contagious? When you share food, drinks or lip balms — or kiss — bacteria passes from one mouth to the other. And if your pal has poor oral health, you could pay the price later. Additionally Krikunenko adds, "Babies are not born with cavity-causing bacteria; it is transferred from adults when they engage with the baby. So if you want to protect your little one from this, please avoid kissing your baby on the lips and sharing food."

## 42. Combat dry mouth

If you experience repeated dry mouth symptoms, your prescription medications could be the root cause. In fact, roughly 62 percent of the most commonly prescribed medications in the U.S. list dry mouth as a potential side effect, according to Delgado. Talk with your pharmacist or physician about the availability of equivalent, alternative medications not known to cause dry mouth as a first step in reducing symptoms. Trying an over-the-counter oral rinse for dry mouth may also help. Or simply try drinking more water or chewing sugar-free gum, Delgado says.

## Recognize signs of TMJ disorders

Temporomandibular joint (TMJ) disorders can cause pain in the muscles and bones of your jaw, pain while chewing, facial pain (especially around the ear) and even migraines. If you think you could have a TMJ disorder, ask for an evaluation from (<https://www.tmjplus.com/what-kind-of-doctor-do-i-see-for-tmj-pain/>) your dentist. "We diagnose the reason for the pain — using X-rays and other tests — and then once we know what the root cause is, we can create either a specified bite splint or an



and then once we know what the root cause is, we can create either a specialized type of appliance that the patient wears, usually at night, similar to a night guard” as a TMJ disorder treatment, Krikunenko says. In some cases, physicians or dentists may also prescribe (<https://quicksplint.com/resources/muscle-relaxants-for-tmj-issues/>) muscle relaxers, anti-inflammatory medications or even Botox to help alleviate pain associated with TMJ disorders.



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## LOOKING GOOD

### 44. Opt for effective whitening techniques

If you feel self-conscious about yellowing or discoloration on your teeth, you can explore the array of whitening options available on the market. You can start with simple, over-the-counter whitening strips, pens or tray-based kits, or look into more comprehensive — and more expensive — in-office whitening options from your dentist. “The results are probably going to be faster and more obvious when you whiten in a professional setting, because the concentrations of medications that we’re able to use as dentists are going to be higher,” says Oquendo Parilli. While purely in-office whitening processes are available, Oquendo Parilli feels the best whitening results are often achieved through a dentist-supervised whitening plan involving custom-fitted trays that patients use at home.

## 45. Go purple

Have you seen purple-colored toothpastes — which promise to whiten teeth — go viral on social media? They can actually work: The purple hue serves as a color-balancing method that masks any yellow on the teeth in order to make them appear whiter, says Wang. “As long as the purple toothpaste has fluoride in it so it can help prevent cavities, it’s perfectly safe to use,” she says. “These toothpastes are a temporary solution, so they work best for people who are looking for just a slightly brighter smile, rather than drastic changes,” she adds. While purple toothpastes can be safe for an occasional whitening boost, opt for an ADA-approved toothpaste for routine, day-to-day brushing.

## 46. Choose the right lip balm

Your lips form and frame your smile, so give them some TLC

too as part of your healthy smile routine. To avoid dry, cracked lips, “stick with natural lip balms, such as those with shea butter or beeswax,” advises Anthony Youn, M.D., a plastic surgeon in Troy, Michigan, and host of *The Holistic Plastic Surgery Show* podcast. Also, avoid lip balms that contain menthol, since the ingredient can sometimes dry or irritate your lips, Youn says. Even better: use one that has sunscreen in it.

## 47. Exfoliate around your mouth

If the skin around your mouth feels dry, try moisturizers specially formulated for the face or a simple exfoliating sugar scrub. You can even make your own DIY version at home. Be sure never to use exfoliating scrubs more than about once a week, or you might risk irritating your skin, Youn says.

## 48. Straighten up

Always wished you had gotten braces in your youth? The good news is that according to the American Association of Orthodontists, there is no age limit for getting orthodontic braces. But they don’t come cheap: They can run into the several thousand range, with or without insurance, so consider that when you talk to your dentist to recommend a good orthodontist. You’ll also need strong teeth and jawbone before you’ll be considered. If you don’t have any major teeth issues, you can research a direct-to-consumer clear teeth straightening or teeth aligning brand such as Invisalign, Candid, NewSmile, Byte, Evenly or SmileDirectClub.



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