

Why brush your teeth?

By John Hackbarth, DDS

A great question to ask your kids is “Why do you brush your teeth?” Answers can range from “You make me,” “I don’t know,” “To keep my breath fresh,” it is not usually “So I will not get cavities.” This is a great mealtime discussion and you should try it.

So, reader, why do you brush your teeth? Do you do it without thinking about it? Is it just a habit? Do you figure that as long as you brush once or twice a day, you are good? Is it mindless, like buttoning your shirt? Or, could you be one of those who are determined to remove every bit of food or debris, dental plaque and calculus after you eat something?

I just asked that question to the last patient of the day and the young man told me, “So my girlfriend will kiss me after lunch.” No brushing, no kissing! That is a very clear rule and easy to follow, and it works.

Last week we filled a tooth for a young lady in high school. We did an exam a few weeks ago, and listed the decay, talked about plaque and gingivitis and showed her photos of both. Once we gave her mom the treatment plan, for budget reasons, she is doing one cavity at a time.

We have now filled four different teeth in four visits. I asked her why brush and she stated that before she started getting the fillings, she would have said to keep her breath fresher, but now she knows to brush them to keep her teeth healthy. I was happy to hear that. We could tell she has been working very hard over the last few weeks because her mouth was very clear, healthy, no swelling, no bleeding and in perfect health.

It is amazing how many people come in to see us with teeth that are not really clean even though they spent extra time brushing before they came in. They know we are going to check their teeth. We can tell who cleans and who does not.

Dentists can live in their own isolated world and think teeth should be cleaned so they don’t get disease. We can be so wrapped up in what we were trained to do, that it is hard to look at the situation from a layman’s point of view.

The public thinks more of fresh breath and white teeth; something others notice. I never admonish a patient for having plaque and calculus. We just point it out, and the damage they cause. My job is to teach not to judge.

You have heard me say before, that clean teeth don’t rot. If there is no food left in the mouth to feed bacteria, there is no infection, no deep scaling, injections, no drilling, no fillings or crowns and no high dental fees.

That is a logical statement, but logic doesn’t always change behavior. As an emotional plea, I can promise that once you are taught how remove all the debris from your mouth each and every time you eat something, and you make a habit of doing that, you will not be able to tolerate a dirty mouth, and you will eliminate infection and cavities.