

#FLOSSMATTERS

It's one of the most universal recommendations in all of public health, and something that I have been preaching ever since I graduated from dental school: Floss daily to prevent gum disease and cavities. However, this month the Associated Press dropped the bombshell that there is weak evidence that supports the need for flossing. This has become a popular topic of discussion in our dental office the past couple of weeks.

It turns out that flossing hasn't really been researched very much. In order for the federal government to recommend something it has to be able to point to a pretty serious body of research. Earlier this year the federal government removed its recommendation for flossing. That said, just because the evidence isn't there doesn't mean an idea is wrong. Unproven is unproven, not disproven.

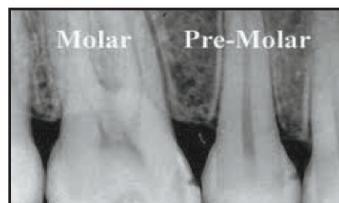
But let's face it, most people don't floss, don't do it well, and frankly lie about doing it anyway... so I have never felt the need to berate them. However, it is my job to educate patients properly on the best way to take care of their mouths. So let's use this recent "attack" on flossing to achieve this.

Common sense, in addition to my professional experience, shows that a tooth brush can NOT clean below the gums. Brushing alone, and even some of the sonic electronic toothbrushes, do really well at removing plaque above the gum line and on the outer surfaces and biting surfaces of the teeth, but it's in between the teeth and below the gums that gets missed. Toothbrushes are not designed to accomplish this goal so if you do want to clean below the gums, which is clearly beneficial from a bacteria control approach, other adjunctive methods must be used. Personally, I think that floss is the easiest, and cheapest, way to accomplish this and it



Dentally Speaking by Jeffrey S. Haddad D.D.S.

is part of my nightly routine. I swear this isn't just a dentist telling you what I want you to hear! I wasn't always a religious flosser and, in my opinion, the amount of dental work that I needed over the years was a result of this. However, I also have used other dental aids that I think are great substitutes for flossing. These include a Waterpik (a motorized oral irrigator) and Soft Picks (interdental cleaners). Either way, brushing alone is not enough to keep your mouth the healthiest it can be. I have witnessed this countless times throughout my career and I will continue to recommend any method a patient is willing to incorporate into their daily routine to complement their brushing.



X-ray showing decay due to poor flossing habits

Plus, the experts who removed the flossing recommendations from the dietary guidelines did not find flossing was useless. They only found that flossing had never been well-studied and that the evidence to date was inconclusive. If someone has gum disease, flossing might be very important for their oral health. Flossing is low-cost, low-risk, and has potential (and biologically plausible) health benefits. In fact, it may very well be a good idea just waiting to be well-studied.

With a well-funded, well-designed study, I'm confident it would easily prove that flossing is good for your oral health. I would not be surprised if it turned out to be good for you in other ways, since gum disease has been

linked to an increased risk of cardiovascular disease, diabetes, and stroke. In the end, I am not going to wait for this study to be conducted because as a dentist and a patient, I see the benefits on a daily basis. But if you don't want to floss, I prom-

ise you won't hurt my feelings...it's your mouth.

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