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Hygiene regimen good for body – and budget



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Photograph by: Postmedia News files

By SUZANNE WINTROB
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As a child, Theodore Vlachos knew he was supposed to brush his teeth after eating and before bedtime but sometimes he couldn't be bothered. Flossing? Forget it. That was too boring. Then, when he was 10 years old, the youngster chipped his front tooth. The dentist tried to affix what Vlachos describes as "a plastic corner" often sported by hockey players with broken teeth. The procedure required a painful root canal.

It was another six years before Vlachos mustered up the courage to see a dentist again. By then, the teenager had a mouth full of cavities and needed them filled. He knew it was his own

fault. Had he brushed his teeth properly and checked in with the dentist, he could have had a much healthier mouth.

Vlachos donned braces at 28 and veneers at 43. These don't come cheap, so today the 46-year-old Laval, Que., resident does his best to brush, floss and see his dentist regularly. And given his memories of those unwelcome cavities, he urges his two teenagers to do the same. If they don't, "they have their mother to deal with — she has perfect teeth," he says.

Vlachos' situation is all too common. According to one recent survey, Canadians rank the smile as the most important attribute when determining the attractiveness of others yet only 30 per cent of us are stringent about brushing, flossing and rinsing.

With dental care an expensive proposition across the country, establishing a good oral health regimen early on makes for healthier bodies and a fatter bank account.

Dr. Alastair Nicoll, a family dentist in Elkford, B.C., believes people would take better care of their mouths if they knew what could happen if they didn't. Plaque and gum disease are common, but they can also lead to diabetes, coronary heart disease and oral cancer. There's also a link between gum disease and premature, low-birth weight babies. Adds dental hygienist Sophia Baltzis of Laval: "The mouth is the entranceway to the body. Bacteria can get in your blood stream and affect the whole body."

To Nicoll's chagrin, many patients come into his practice and make excuses for the state of their teeth, often blaming it on soft teeth they inherited from their parents. He won't accept it: "There's no truth in that. Teeth are teeth. But what varies tremendously is the kind of bacteria that's in a person's mouth and the ability of the individual to cope with the bacteria." The bacteria that causes decay sits within the plaque, he explains, so brushing and flossing regularly will remove the plaque. It doesn't even matter if you brush before or after food, he adds, as long as the plaque is eliminated.

Dental practitioners recommend spending a full two minutes brushing, focusing on each quadrant of the mouth for 30 seconds. An average song length is two-and-a-half minutes, says Baltzis, so turn on the radio before grabbing the brush. Or use an electric toothbrush since many have built-in timers.

Flossing at least once a day is also critical because it removes plaque between the teeth and stimulates gums. Nicoll says some people do excellent jobs with wooden or plastic triangular sticks, while floss threaders help those with retainers. All can be easily purchased "and bingo bango bongo you're clean," says Nicoll.

Mouthwash is useful, too, "but only when everything else is being done." Even chewing sugarless gum, especially sweetened with xylitol, has its advantages because it stimulates saliva flow which helps fight decay.

There's also diet to consider. Nicoll suggests avoiding acids such as those found in citric and carbonated drinks because it dissolves tooth structure. Baltzis urges parents not to put their child to bed with a bottle as the milk will sit on their teeth all night.

But if you really have to have that sweet treat, have a toothbrush handy.

"If you want it and you crave it, go ahead and have it," says Baltzis. "Just take care of your teeth afterwards."