

# Should you brush your teeth before or after breakfast? What experts say.

There are pros and cons for both.

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By [Lindsey Bever](#)

## The question

Is it better to brush your teeth before or after breakfast or a cup of coffee?

## The science

We all have our morning routines. Some of us make a beeline for the bathroom to brush away morning breath. Others prefer to start with a cup of coffee and a bit to eat before brushing. But which is better for your teeth? We asked dental experts to explain the science — and tell us their own personal preferences.

There is a case to be made for brushing your teeth before eating or drinking. Microorganisms in the mouth, such as bacteria, can cause a bad taste and odor, and in dental plaque — a film made up of primarily bacteria, food particles and saliva — can lead to cavities, gingivitis and other forms of [gum disease](#).

Brushing your teeth with a [fluoride-containing toothpaste](#) and [the correct technique](#) when you wake up helps remove plaque and bacteria that develop overnight. This can make “juice, coffee and breakfast” taste better, and the toothpaste coats your teeth with fluoride and other minerals that protect your teeth during the meal, said Steven Katz, president of the American Association of Endodontists.

“When food interacts with plaque, which is a sticky film of bacteria, acid production occurs, leading to erosion of the enamel and tooth decay,” he said.

It is also a good idea to brush after eating or drinking. Brushing after a meal removes the food particles that get trapped in the grooves of your teeth, between the teeth, along the gumline and in the biofilms formed by the bacteria that coat your teeth, said Margherita Fontana, a professor at the University of Michigan School of Dentistry.

That's why two of the three experts who spoke to The Washington Post said they brush both before *and* after their morning meal. The third expert brushes before breakfast and then again in the middle of the day.

For people who prefer to brush their teeth first thing in the morning, brushing again after breakfast may not always be practical. But it may make sense for adults who are more prone to cavities, Fontana said.

"If you brush appropriately, you can brush as frequently as you want," she said.

If you cannot brush both before and after breakfast, it should be fine as long as you are brushing at least twice per day — morning and night — and flossing, ideally after your last meal of the day to avoid consuming any food or beverages other than water once teeth are clean, Fontana said.

### **Should you wait a certain amount of time after breakfast before brushing?**

Typically, there is no reason to wait. If, however, you consume acidic foods or drinks such as citrus fruits and those containing vinegar, wine or carbonation, some experts recommend waiting 30 to 60 minutes. (Coffee is not that acidic, so no reason to delay brushing after a cup of joe, experts said.)

"Acids temporarily soften the enamel, and brushing too soon can wear it away. Rinsing with water right after eating is a good alternative in the meantime," Katz said.

If you cannot rinse with water, chewing sugarless gum after a meal can allow your saliva to continue flowing, effectively washing away the food particles and debris and protecting your teeth, said Ruchi Sahota, a spokeswoman for the American Dental Association and a family dentist in Fremont, California.

Pro tip: If you notice that food keeps getting stuck in the same spot, tell your dentist, as it could mean there is decay in that area that needs to be addressed, Sahota said.

### **When should you floss, and should you do it before or after brushing?**

There is no wrong time to floss, though some experts said cleaning between your teeth before going to bed has an advantage — ensuring you do not leave behind food particles that can breed bacteria and encourage the formation of plaque overnight.

Also, there is no official guidance on the correct sequence of brushing and flossing, but two small studies suggest there may be benefits to flossing between your teeth before brushing them.

Clearing those hard-to-reach spaces first “not only reduces the risk of cavities and gum disease but also allows the fluoride in your toothpaste to reach more surfaces of your teeth,” Katz said.

## What else you should know

When brushing your teeth, the correct tools and technique are crucial; brushing too aggressively can lead to gum recession, erosion of the enamel and tooth sensitivity for some people, dental experts said.

Here’s what they recommend:

- **Brushing:** Brush at least twice per day — morning and night — for at least two minutes with a soft-bristled toothbrush or, even better, an electric toothbrush and a fluoride-containing toothpaste. The advantage of electric toothbrushes is that they do the work for you. They oscillate and rotate or vibrate to dislodge food particles and plaque, many have timers to tell you how long to brush, and some have pressure sensors to alert you when you are brushing too hard. But with the proper technique, manual toothbrushes can get the job done, too. Ask your oral health provider to walk you through best practices.
- **Rinsing:** After brushing your teeth with a fluoride-containing toothpaste, skip the rinse, experts said. This allows the fluoride to stay on your teeth. If, however, you feel that you need to rinse, do so with a small amount of water such as a sip from your hand. Or if you feel that you need a more thorough rinse, consider using a mouthwash that contains fluoride.
- **Flossing:** Floss, ideally before brushing your teeth, at least once per day and use the proper technique. For flat-edged teeth, such as the front teeth for some people, flossing in an up-and-down motion may work. But for rounded teeth such as the back molar, use the C-shape technique — start at the base of the tooth near the gumline, curve the floss in the shape of a C, and glide it up and down several times to clear food particles and plaque from under the gumline and on the tooth surface.

## The bottom line

Brushing before or after breakfast is a personal choice. And while there are advantages to doing both, in general, brushing after any meal is a good idea.

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