

by Dr. Mark Burhenne, DDS

Without even looking into your mouth, I'm going to wager a guess that you're probably brushing too hard and unknowingly causing damage to your dentin and gums. As a country we are brushing too hard, which is causing [receding gums](#), damaged dentin and teeth, and more cavities. In fact, for many people, brushing is doing more harm than good.

How can I possibly know this? I'm Dr. Mark Burhenne, or Dr. B for short, and I've been in practice for over three decades while raising three daughters with zero cavities between them. I've had front row seats (literally) to the changes in dental health and have witnessed the effects of various brushing habits. This allows me to say, without a doubt, that most Americans are brushing too hard.

Your mouth has a significant impact on your overall health. Taking care of it – *the right way* – has got to be a priority. The problem is, so much of what's thought to be healthy for the mouth, actually isn't. Brushing hard is one of these misconceptions.

Now it's time to clear up some of those misconceptions and put a stop to this damaging habit. Meanwhile, you need to learn how to brush your teeth properly.

If you're not sure whether your brushing is causing more harm than good, ask yourself these questions:

- Do you brush in a back and forth sawing motion?
- Is your toothbrush over a month old?
- Are your toothbrush bristles rated medium or hard because you think they will do a better job cleaning your teeth?

(Spoiler: Most people answer “yes” to at least one of these questions, if not all of them.)

Modern Diets Call for Modern Dental Care

I'm going to take one for the team and acknowledge that dentists are partly to blame for over-brushing. We've placed an emphasis on brushing and flossing to solve our oral hygiene issues, and in an effort to carry out doctors' orders, many people have gone too far (and too hard) with their brushing habits.

The truth of the matter is that brushing is merely a temporary bandage for the unhealthy changes in our modern diet. Our Paleolithic ancestors didn't have toothbrushes, and numerous cultures across the world still don't use toothbrushes like we do.

In fact, I bet you'd be surprised to hear that toothbrushing in America wasn't a widespread routine until after World War II — once the Army pushed their [soldiers to brush their teeth](#) to prevent disease on the front lines.

While people have used tooth chews and picks for centuries, actual brushing of the team is a fairly modern phenomenon. And this isn't a coincidence. The rise in popularity of teeth brushing in the 1940s occurred around the same time dietary carbohydrates, sugar and [processed foods](#) became widely available.

Even the soldiers in World War II were eating rations packed with biscuits, canned meat, canned cheese, dried fruit bars, chocolate, oatmeal, cereal, sugar and some canned vegetables — all of which were (not surprisingly) rotting their teeth. Yes, those are some of the [worst foods for your teeth](#)! That's because carbs and sugar feed harmful bacteria in the mouth. These bacteria then multiply and become biofilm on your teeth — like that fuzzy buildup you feel after eating a bag of goldfish.

The Army realized tooth decay was making soldiers sick and, therefore, toothbrushing became mandatory.

The Damaging Brushing Habits You Need to Stop Today

Today, now that toothbrushing is a regular part of everyone's personal care routines, most people have a couple of habits that are causing their teeth and gums harm.

First, you do not want to mimic the actors you see in toothpaste commercials. That sawing motion is the first damaging habit that needs to stop. Your toothbrush bristles are made of nylon, which is actually quite hard compared to the relatively soft gums and dentin.

Fleshy, pink gums and brittle dentin didn't develop to handle the sweeping motion of your nylon-based toothbrush, and when you saw back and forth while brushing your teeth, the nylon can be like little knives being brushed over your teeth and gums, causing microdamage that wears them down over time.

You might also be surprised to learn that your toothbrush bristles also harden over time. This is the primary reason behind the recommendation to replace your toothbrush regularly. Soft nylon is made polished and rounded so that it's extra soft and gentle on your gums and teeth. As you brush, your teeth wear down this coating, making the nylon sharper and more abrasive. Eventually, the nylon becomes so abrasive that it begins to wear your teeth down instead of your teeth wearing the nylon down as it should.

Ideally, you should be replacing your toothbrush every month. Never let your toothbrush hang around your bathroom sink longer than three months. (This is why there are value packs of toothbrushes, and I recommend buying a pack of six or more so it's easy to replace your toothbrushes.)

Finally, it's critical that you do NOT brush immediately after eating anything acidic or high in sugar or carbs. The recommendation to brush right after you eat is based on the idea that you can remove the damaging foods before they influence the [microbiome](#) of the mouth. **But if you**

brush directly after eating anything acidic or high in sugar or carbs, you will lift enamel right off your teeth.

If you choose to eat foods like coffee, soda, juice, crackers, candy or anything else that is acidic or high in sugar and/or carbs, I recommend waiting at least 30–45 minutes before brushing.

Receding gums, [gum disease](#), gouges in dentin, and worn down enamel cannot be corrected without major and costly surgeries and restorations, which is why it's so important that we change the conversation from simply "make sure you brush" to "make sure you brush *correctly*."

How to Brush Your Teeth PROPERLY

So, how SHOULD you brush your teeth?

Brushing your teeth the right way matters. When you brush too hard you can cause gum recession, notches in your dentin and wear away your enamel. All of this damage is permanent but largely preventable.

Here are my seven tips for how to brush your teeth the right way:

1. Break damaging habits

First, I recommend you start brushing your teeth with your non-dominant hand to correct your brushing habits. It's going to feel super awkward, but it's going to make you pay attention. [Here's a quick Youtube video on that.](#)

2. Brush in an oscillatory or vibratory motion

The best motion for brushing your teeth is to mimic the action of an electric toothbrush. Ideally, your toothbrush won't move up and down or side to side in a sawing motion, but in a circular motion. Imagine you are massaging each tooth.

3. Only buy very soft toothbrushes

Always buy toothbrushes with very soft bristles. Nylon is a tough material and can easily damage gums and dentin.

4. Replace your toothbrush regularly

The nylon in your toothbrush is designed to wear down over time, so it's important to replace your toothbrush regularly. I recommend buying value packs of toothbrushes so it's easy to replace your toothbrush each month. And please, don't use any of your toothbrushes longer than three months.

5. Consider an electric toothbrush

Electric toothbrushes are great if the heads are replaced regularly and the bristles are very soft. If you neglect to regularly change the toothbrush head, you can inadvertently turn your toothbrush into a weapon against your poor gums and teeth. If you take care of your electric toothbrush, they can be very effective at improving your oral care routine. Your hand isn't capable at moving 25k to 30k rotations a minute, so electric brushes can significantly speed up the brushing process.

6. Don't brush right after eating

While this is especially true after eating anything acidic, sugary or high in carbs, it's best to play it safe and avoid brushing 40 to 50 minutes after eating. I know it might feel good to brush all that food off your teeth, but you also could pull bits of enamel off as well.

7. Eat a better diet

Brushing will only help your teeth so much. What matters more is that you're eating a nutrient-rich diet high in protein and healthy fats and low in sugar and carbs.

For a Lifelong and Beautiful Smile, Be Kind to Your Teeth

Brushing the teeth is not natural or normal, and it's a pretty abusive process, so it's important that you do what you can to minimize the damage. Priority No. 1 is eating a healthy diet, which makes brushing less necessary. When you do brush make sure the bristles are soft, replaced regularly and that you brush in a gentle oscillatory motion.

It's time to stop abusing our teeth. You can prevent receding gums, dentin damage and cavities with the right diet and brushing techniques.

I hope this article helps to clear up some common misconceptions and points you in the right direction for a brighter smile and healthier life. Remember, your mouth is the gateway to your overall health, and when you take care of it, you'll experience better health all around.

Dr. Mark Burhenne, or Dr. B for short, is a dentist with a blog (askthedentist.com) to empower people to understand how your mouth is a window into the health of the rest of your body. In his 30 years of practice as a dentist, he's seen a lot of misinformation and people who have fallen through the cracks due to our healthcare system's failure to understand the oral-body connection.