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The Bottom Line on Flossing

Let's take a closer look at the AP article that questioned the use of flossing for dental health (1). Based on the science to date, it appears there isn't enough research for the government to recommend that everyone floss daily. Is there no research to support flossing? More important, does flossing contribute to dental health?

A dentist wrote an opinion piece for The Huffington Post blog (2); he addressed the AP article very well by taking a second look at an article the AP used as part of their claim for a lack of support for flossing. In the review article, researchers did a study with over 800 children, ages 4 to 13, comparing self-flossing, professional flossing every three months, and professional flossing done five days per week in school for about a year and a half (3). The kids who were professionally flossed five days a week had 40% fewer cavities than those in the other two groups. His point was that for flossing to be effective, it must be done properly.

Therein lies the problem. Without a way to make sure people floss correctly, it's not surprising the research is sparse. When it's done properly, the results are significant.

The Problems

The AP investigative report just struck a sour note with me. Here's why.

First, why raise the question to begin with? The only reason I can think of is that the author hates flossing. It's not like flossing will damage anyone's teeth, so why fight it?

Second, I checked the credentials of all the investigative journalists that work for the AP including the author. None has any science or statistical analytic background. The journalists are excellent investigative reporters, but they're not scientists.

Third, based on how people responded to the headlines, including other writers, they've just given people an excuse not to floss daily or at all. While the proof of benefit may not be sufficient, there's no proof of harm. But there is a scientifically proven link between gum disease and ulcers, and between gum disease and heart disease. What did the authors accomplish except possibly to contribute to more health problems for Americans?

The Bottom Line

I haven't missed a day of flossing in close to 30 years. There were times while traveling I had to take thread out of a sewing kit when I ran out of floss, but I haven't missed a day. Why? Because in 1988 I saw the x-rays of my teeth. The bone was receding from my teeth and if I didn't start flossing, my teeth would start falling out. No way that was happening. I've seen my x-rays since, and everything's fine. I would have to say flossing has worked for me.

My health truth regarding flossing still stands true. Learn how to floss properly; your dental hygienist will be delighted to teach you how. Floss at least once a day. By helping you prevent gum disease, flossing also helps protect your heart and digestive system by reducing the dangerous bacteria flowing into your system. And flossing earns you more kisses because advanced gum disease has the most repulsive smell of any illness I can think of, and there's



no product that really disguises it for long. If you have a job or activity in which you deal with the public, I beg you on behalf of everyone you talk to: please keep your teeth and gums healthy.

Or you can get ready to pay for fillings, root canals, implants, crowns, or dentures. Your body. Your wallet. Your choice.

What are you prepared to do today?

Dr. Chet

References:

1. <http://apne.ws/2b8Nni1>
2. <http://huff.to/2beY3Lq>
3. JDR April 2006 vol. 85 no. four 298-305. doi: 10.1177/154405910608500404

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