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Pandemic Habits: More snacking, less brushing

Dentists are seeing more patients with serious teeth and gum issues as staying home leads to more eating and poorer oral health



Amrita Kaur

Real estate agent Leslie Mui used to brush his teeth after every meal. But during the pandemic, he has been working from home and finding it hard to keep this up.

The 49-year-old says: "It was troublesome to brush each time after eating a snack. I was also hardly going out, so I saw no need to maintain that level of hygiene."

Mr Mui also snacked more during the circuit breaker last year.

He started to have a toothache in May last year and developed a large cavity by December, which needed root canal treatment.

Dentists are seeing more patients like him. Those whom The Straits Times spoke to saw a 10 to 30 per cent rise in patients with teeth problems after the circuit breaker last year. These problems include tooth decay, deep cavities, gum infection and cracked teeth.

Dr Kenny Wong, a dental surgeon at SmileArts Dental Studio, says many of his patients consumed more snacks and sugary beverages while working from home.

"Unfortunately, this habit occurs throughout the day and in between mealtimes. It is bad news for the teeth because it increases the likelihood of tooth decay," he says.

His observation dovetails with the results of a survey by GSK Consumer Healthcare and independent market research agency Ipsos.

The survey, which polled 500 people in Singapore, found that respondents consumed more snacks and sugary drinks during the pandemic - 26 per cent took more snacks and 8 per cent took more soft drinks.

The study, conducted in February, polled a total of 4,500 adults aged 18 years old and above across countries from Europe to South-east Asia, including Singapore.

The top three oral health conditions suffered by respondents here were sensitive teeth, stained teeth and plaque, the survey found. But only 14 per cent of respondents reported brushing their teeth more often during the pandemic.

The Dental Studio's dental director, Dr Jonathan Liu, says a change in routine and a laid-back attitude while staying at home led people to neglect oral hygiene.

"Some patients who are smokers mentioned smoking more when working from home. This leads to an increase in harmful deposits on teeth and a deterioration in gum health. Some also reported being busier at home and jumping straight into work without brushing their teeth when they wake up in the morning," he adds.

FEWER DENTIST VISITS

Dr Jeffrey Ng, a dental surgeon at Smile Central Clinic, says the disruption in routine has caused stress and anxiety in people, which could have made them feel less motivated to take care of their health, including oral health.

On top of that, fears about contracting Covid-19 have made people hesitant to visit dentists.

Indeed, according to the study by GSK and Ipsos, 36 per cent of people in Singapore have reduced



Teeth woes on the rise

their frequency or stopped visiting the dentist altogether.

Among respondents who said they were worried or somewhat worried about visiting the dentist, 27 per cent felt there was a high chance of contracting Covid-19 from dental equipment.

Marketing executive Sarah Chua, 30, put off going to the dentist when she had a mild toothache in July last year, for fear of Covid-19.

"I didn't want to put myself at any risk of transmission, so I took painkillers at home and the ache subsided gradually," she says.

But dentists say there is nothing to worry about as measures are in place to minimise cross-infection. This includes sterilisation of equipment and dentists donning the full personal protective equipment, including an N95 mask, face shield, gown and gloves.

SMILE, YOU'RE ON ZOOM

But the fear of going to the dentist during the pandemic has not dampened the growing interest in

improving the appearance of one's pearly-whites.

An online survey found that seven in 10 people are now more keen to straighten their teeth. Two in five said video calls for work have made them more aware of their smiles. The survey of 500 adults aged 18 to 44 in Singapore was conducted between Dec 23 and Jan 10. It was commissioned by Align Technology, which designs and manufactures the Invisalign clear aligners, which are fitted over teeth to straighten them.

Dr Saminatharaj Kumar, chief executive and dental surgeon at Nuffield Dental, has seen a "significant increase" in the number of patients requesting teeth straightening procedures since June last year.

He says: "Since video calls have become integrated in our normal routine, people are making a bigger effort to groom themselves. It's not just with make-up because it is rather hard to camouflage teeth with just lipstick, but also by straightening and whitening their teeth."

But there might be an easier way to ensure a nice smile during video meetings. To prevent teeth stains and decay, just make sure to brush your teeth twice daily, say dentists.

Dr Kumar has come across many patients who think it is fine to brush their teeth once a day.

"That's not correct. Patients who ensure that they brush and floss before they sleep at night typically have much less dental disease."

Dr Liu says brushing one's teeth twice a day instead of just once reduces the exposure of teeth to the harmful effects of bacterial plaque, which is responsible for most common dental problems such as tooth decay or gum disease. This also helps to maintain a fresh breath and remove teeth stains.

Dr Kumar adds: "With good oral healthcare, fewer teeth are likely to be lost. Good oral healthcare is your right and you need to empower a dentist to give you that happy feeling of having a good, clean mouth."

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Dr Jonathan Liu (above right), The Dental Studio's dental director, says a change in routine during the pandemic and a laid-back attitude while staying at home have led people to neglect oral hygiene. ST PHOTO: ALPHONSUS CHERN

Tips for healthy teeth, gums

Dr Kenny Wong, a dental surgeon at SmileArts Dental Studio, and Dr Jonathan Liu, dental director at The Dental Studio, share tips for good oral hygiene.

- 1 Brush teeth twice daily**
Brush your teeth twice daily, once in the morning and once in the evening for at least two to three minutes each time to prevent the build-up of plaque and bad breath, and to keep your gums healthy.
Try to use shorter and slower strokes while brushing. If you have brushed well, your teeth should feel smooth like glass to the touch of your tongue.
- 2 Buy a good brush**
A good brush should have soft and dense bristles and feel comfortable in the hand. It is time to get a new one if the bristles are fraying.
- 3 Consider an electric toothbrush**
If you find your teeth surfaces rough despite brushing twice a day, consider an electric toothbrush. Electric brushes have been shown to remove plaque more effectively than manual ones, especially if your brushing technique is poor.
- 4 Floss your teeth daily**
Daily flossing helps to remove food debris and plaque trapped in between teeth.
- 5 Use a toothpaste with fluoride**
Fluoride strengthens your teeth. It protects the outer covering of your teeth, known as enamel, and prevent cavities.
- 6 Reduce the daily intake of sugary drinks**
This helps to decrease the risk of tooth decay. Sugar in sweet drinks serves as a substrate to bacteria that reside in the mouth. It also secretes acid and destroys tooth enamel, leading to cavities.
- 7 Visit the dentist regularly**
This helps the dentist to pick up problems, so these can be treated early and with minimal fuss.