



Understanding Dental Plaque and Tartar

What They Are, Why They Matter, and How to Prevent Them

Why Plaque and Tartar Matter

Healthy teeth and gums begin with effective plaque control. Dental plaque is the primary cause of tooth decay and gum disease, making its daily removal one of the most important steps in maintaining oral health.

If plaque is not removed regularly, it can harden into tartar (also called **calculus**), which cannot be removed by brushing alone.

Understanding the difference between plaque and tartar can help you protect your smile for life.

What Is Dental Plaque?

Dental plaque is a soft, sticky film made up of:

- Bacteria
- Saliva
- Food particles
- Bacterial by-products

Plaque begins forming on the teeth within hours after brushing and continues to accumulate throughout the day.

Because plaque is nearly colorless, many people do not realize it is present.

Why Is Plaque Harmful?

The bacteria in plaque feed on sugars from foods and beverages.

As they digest these sugars, they produce acids that can:

- Damage tooth enamel
- Cause cavities
- Irritate the gums
- Trigger inflammation
- Lead to gum disease

Without regular removal, plaque becomes increasingly harmful over time.

What Is Tartar?

If plaque is not removed, minerals naturally found in saliva cause it to harden into **tartar (calculus)**.

Unlike plaque:

- Tartar is hard.
- It is firmly attached to the teeth.
- It cannot be removed with a toothbrush or dental floss.

Professional dental instruments are required to remove tartar safely.

Why Is Tartar a Problem?

Tartar creates a rough surface that allows even more plaque to accumulate.

This increases the risk of:

- Gingivitis
- Periodontal disease
- Persistent bad breath
- Gum recession
- Tooth loss

The longer tartar remains on the teeth, the greater the chance of gum inflammation.

Where Does Plaque Build Up?

Plaque commonly collects:

- Along the gumline
- Between the teeth
- On the chewing surfaces of molars
- Around fillings, crowns, and bridges
- Around braces and orthodontic appliances
- On the tongue

Some areas are more difficult to clean and require extra attention.

Signs of Plaque and Tartar Buildup

You may notice:

- A fuzzy feeling on the teeth
- Bleeding during brushing or flossing
- Red or swollen gums
- Persistent bad breath
- Yellow or brown deposits near the gumline

Only a dental examination can determine the extent of plaque and tartar buildup.

How Can You Prevent Plaque?

Good daily oral hygiene is the best defense.

Brush Twice Daily

Brush for at least **two minutes** using fluoride toothpaste.

Clean Between Your Teeth

Floss or use another interdental cleaning device every day.

This removes plaque from areas your toothbrush cannot reach.

Brush Your Tongue

The tongue also collects bacteria that contribute to plaque and bad breath.

Cleaning your tongue daily helps reduce bacterial buildup.

Eat a Balanced Diet

Limiting frequent sugary snacks reduces the food supply for plaque bacteria.

Water is the healthiest beverage for your teeth.

Visit Your Dentist Regularly

Professional dental cleanings remove tartar that cannot be removed at home.

Routine examinations also help detect early signs of gum disease.

Can Plaque Be Removed at Home?

Yes.

Fresh plaque can usually be removed by:

- Brushing
- Flossing
- Cleaning between the teeth
- Good daily oral hygiene

The key is removing plaque **before** it hardens into tartar.

Can Tartar Be Removed at Home?

No.

Despite advertisements for various products, hardened tartar cannot safely be removed with:

- Toothbrushes
- Dental floss
- Toothpicks
- Home scraping tools

Attempting to remove tartar yourself may damage your teeth or gums.

Professional dental cleaning is the safest and most effective option.

Common Myths

"If I can't see plaque, I don't have it."

False.

Plaque is often nearly invisible and forms continuously.

"Mouthwash removes tartar."

False.

Mouthwash may reduce bacteria, but it cannot remove hardened tartar.

"Scraping tartar off at home is safe."

False.

Using sharp instruments at home may injure your gums or damage your teeth.

Key Takeaways

✓ Dental plaque is the primary cause of cavities and gum disease.

- ✓ Plaque can harden into tartar if it is not removed.
 - ✓ Tartar cannot be removed at home.
 - ✓ Brush twice daily and clean between your teeth every day.
 - ✓ Professional dental cleanings remove tartar safely.
 - ✓ Good plaque control is one of the most effective ways to protect your oral health.
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References

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