



# Professional Dental Cleanings Explained

## What Happens During a Dental Cleaning and Why It Matters

### Why Professional Dental Cleanings Are Important

Brushing and cleaning between your teeth every day are the foundation of good oral health. However, even excellent home care cannot remove **hardened tartar (calculus)** that forms on the teeth over time.

Professional dental cleanings help remove plaque and tartar, reduce the risk of cavities and gum disease, and allow your dental team to detect oral health problems early.

Routine cleanings are an important part of preventive dental care for people of all ages.

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## What Is Dental Plaque?

Dental plaque is a soft, sticky film made up of bacteria that continuously forms on your teeth.

If plaque is not removed regularly, bacteria produce acids that can:

- Cause tooth decay
- Irritate the gums
- Lead to gingivitis
- Contribute to periodontal (gum) disease

Daily brushing and flossing remove most plaque before it hardens.

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## What Is Tartar?

When plaque remains on the teeth, it can harden into **tartar (calculus)**.

Unlike plaque:

- Tartar cannot be removed with a toothbrush.
- It provides a rough surface where more bacteria can accumulate.
- It increases the risk of gum disease.

Only a dental professional can safely remove tartar.

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## Who Performs a Dental Cleaning?

Professional cleanings are typically performed by a:

- Dental hygienist
- Dentist

Both are trained to remove plaque and tartar while helping patients improve their oral hygiene.

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## What Happens During a Routine Cleaning?

Although every visit is different, a professional dental cleaning often includes several steps.

### Medical and Dental History

Your dental team may review:

- Changes in your health
- New medications
- Dental concerns
- Previous treatment

This information helps guide your care.

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### Oral Examination

Before cleaning, your dentist or hygienist examines your:

- Teeth

- Gums
- Tongue
- Existing dental restorations
- Oral tissues

Any areas of concern may be discussed before treatment begins.

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## **Scaling**

Scaling removes:

- Plaque
- Tartar

from above and just below the gumline using specialized hand instruments or ultrasonic devices.

This is the most important part of the professional cleaning.

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## **Tooth Polishing**

After scaling, many patients have their teeth polished using a soft polishing cup and a mildly abrasive polishing paste.

Polishing helps:

- Remove surface stains
- Smooth tooth surfaces
- Leave teeth feeling clean

Polishing is cosmetic and does **not** replace plaque removal.

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## **Flossing**

Your hygienist may floss between your teeth to remove any remaining polishing paste and check for areas where home cleaning may be difficult.

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## **Fluoride Treatment (When Recommended)**

Some patients benefit from professional fluoride treatment.

Fluoride may help:

- Strengthen enamel
- Reduce tooth sensitivity
- Lower the risk of cavities

Fluoride treatment is often recommended for children and adults who have an increased risk of tooth decay.

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## Does a Dental Cleaning Hurt?

Most routine cleanings cause little or no discomfort.

Some people may experience temporary sensitivity if they have:

- Inflamed gums
- Heavy tartar buildup
- Gum recession
- Sensitive teeth

If you feel uncomfortable during the procedure, tell your dental professional. They can often adjust the treatment to improve your comfort.

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## How Long Does a Cleaning Take?

A routine dental cleaning usually takes **30 to 60 minutes**, depending on:

- The amount of plaque and tartar present
  - Your oral health
  - Whether X-rays or an examination are also performed
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## How Often Do You Need a Cleaning?

The ideal schedule varies from person to person.

Many healthy adults benefit from professional cleanings approximately every **six months**.

However, people with:

- Gum disease
- Diabetes
- Heavy tartar buildup
- Dry mouth
- Tobacco use

may benefit from more frequent cleanings.

Your dentist will recommend a schedule based on your individual needs.

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## What Is a Deep Cleaning?

A **deep cleaning**, also called **scaling and root planing**, is different from a routine cleaning.

It is performed when gum disease has caused infection below the gumline.

Deep cleaning removes plaque and tartar from the root surfaces and helps the gums heal.

Your dentist will recommend this treatment only when clinically necessary.

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## After Your Cleaning

Following a professional cleaning, you may notice:

- Cleaner, smoother teeth
- Fresher breath
- Mild temporary sensitivity (in some people)

Continue your normal oral hygiene routine by:

- Brushing twice daily with fluoride toothpaste
  - Cleaning between your teeth every day
  - Drinking water regularly
  - Following your dentist's recommendations
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# Common Myths

**"Professional cleanings damage enamel."**

**False.**

Professional cleanings remove harmful plaque and tartar without damaging healthy enamel.

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**"If I brush well, I never need a cleaning."**

**False.**

Even excellent brushing cannot remove hardened tartar.

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**"Cleanings are only cosmetic."**

**False.**

Professional cleanings are an important preventive procedure that helps reduce the risk of gum disease and tooth loss.

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## Key Takeaways

- ✓ Professional dental cleanings remove plaque and tartar that cannot be removed at home.
  - ✓ Routine cleanings help prevent gum disease and cavities.
  - ✓ Most cleanings are comfortable and take less than one hour.
  - ✓ Deep cleaning is a separate procedure used to treat gum disease.
  - ✓ Daily brushing and flossing remain essential between dental visits.
  - ✓ Preventive dental care helps maintain a healthy smile throughout life.
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## References

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