

## TO FLOSS OR NOT TO FLOSS - THAT IS THE QUESTION

By Dr. Victor M. Sternberg

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A recent article has again appeared in the news regarding the efficacy or lack of effectiveness of dental flossing in preventing dental disease and decay. In previous correspondence, I discussed the concept of toothbrushing being a misleading term in that what we try to do whether it be flossing our teeth, WaterPiking our teeth or brushing our teeth is to remove all of the bacterial plaque twice a day so disease cannot occur.

It is not what you do but how you do it. As I've mentioned before, all of my patients who present with periodontal disease brush their teeth and many of my patients have flossed their teeth for years yet they still have periodontal issues.

When reviewing and teaching patients, it's become clear that flossing is a very precise technique. If it's not done very carefully and meticulously, plaque is not removed. In addition, if you have some recession of the gum and the teeth are longer, floss has difficulty removing all the plaque.

This is not to say that flossing is not important or necessary but like brushing your teeth, using a WaterPik or using floss, the devil is in the details and the details matter.

An interesting aside, I have observed many patients using WaterPiks. When they use them and I notice they still have bleeding or inflammation, I have them demonstrate how they use the WaterPik. Invariably, they move the WaterPik from tooth to tooth, not lingering in any one spot. The WaterPik can only be effective when it's held at the space between the teeth for a count of 5, both on the inside and outside of each tooth. Just as a brush does not effectively work when it's moved too quickly, the WaterPik must linger the same way brush bristles have to linger at the gumline.

Beware of too much media information. The media has a particular interest in debunking things that we're doing because it makes news.

In reality, I'll make the following statement: Flossing improperly, brushing incorrectly and WaterPiking ineffectually do not prevent disease. On the other hand, those procedures when done properly and frequently after being taught carefully are effective and you can take that to the bank.

Yours truly,  
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