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What's in a brush?

Daunted by toothbrush choices? Don't be with these tips. *By Dr. Susan Maples*

Q: I stood in the toothbrush aisle last week, mesmerized by the vast array of choices. HELP!

A: Ah yes, the toothbrush industry is thriving. The truth is all soft bristle brushes work well if used properly, but let me help you simplify your choices.

First, *soft* bristles are the *only* bristles recommended by the ADA, and every practicing dentist I know. Some people prefer medium and hard bristles because they like the feel of a hearty scrub, but these bristles are a major causative factor in gum recession-- from trauma. Recession is irreversible (except surgically). These exposed "cervical" root surfaces are very easily abraded (notched) by scrubbing. They can also become quite sensitive to hot, cold, sweets and touch. Root surfaces are seven times more susceptible to decay than enamel.

Manual brushes vary in design, but the most important element is your ability to use it well. Ask yourself if you can get the brush easily on the gum line of ALL your teeth, from the tongue side *and* the cheek side? Smaller brush heads are better for hard-to-reach areas. Technique matters. Use small, back-and-forth or circular strokes with light pressure, holding the brush at the gum line (that's critical). To do this well it takes TIME. Consider an alternative.

Power brushes to the rescue! The literature consistently reports for all ages, no matter which power brush you choose, it will far outpace your manual toothbrush in plaque removal, stain removal and reduced inflammation. In our Hand's On Learning Lab, the hygienist smears peanut butter on her gloved hand. Children remove the peanut butter with a manual brush and then a spin brush, comparing the effectiveness. It's truly an "Ah-ha!" moment!

A power brush doesn't rely on good dexterity either. You simply hold the brush at the gum line and move it along slowly, letting the brush head action do all the work. Thus, it's even great for people with arthritis or other physical disabilities.

Now which power brush? Rechargeable brushes are more effective than external battery driven. Spinning brushes have different action than sonic (fast back and forth) brushes. The literature does not consistently favor one over another. All these brushes have differentiating features such as timers, quarter (quadrant) timers, power controllers, interchangeable head designs, etc. Weigh the features and check out Consumers Reports for more detail. One last tip: If you want to make your power brush last, don't store in on an active charger. You will extend the battery life by using it till it's empty before you recharge.