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## How well do you floss?

It's important to floss by traditional or alternative means. *By Dr. Susan Maples*

Q: There are so many alternatives to traditional [dental floss](#) these days. Which ones work best?

A: Cleaning the sides of your teeth, the surfaces unreachable by the bristles of your toothbrush is imperative—for the health of your gums, bones, heart and other critical organs. The question is how do we do that most effectively?

Learning to use dental floss properly is a skill I want every one of my patients to master. Beginning with the back surface of the back teeth, it is important to curve the floss around each side of each tooth in a C-shape and wipe it up and down a few times. Remember, the surfaces below the gum line are the most critical so press as far down as you can, until you meet a natural resistance. In areas where there are periodontal “pockets”, where bone loss has occurred, the floss will not likely reach the bottom of that dip. More on how to achieve better access in these deeper pockets in a minute...

The multiple floss aids/alternatives are vast. Any widget that suspends a little piece of dental floss can do the same task as traditional floss if used properly. Again, keep in mind that in order to create the c-shape, it is important to put some pressure against the side you are cleaning. Often I see people just click it between their teeth. That may be enough to remove an irritating food particle but not enough to remove the sticky “pellicle” that holds the bacteria-laden plaque against the surface of the tooth. Incidentally, do yourself a favor and let your dentist address any area that is a regular food trap, as it often leads to permanent bone loss.

Other aids such as little tapered brushes and tooth picks can also work well. Place one between the teeth, wherever they fit without forcing, and go for it. If you can push them in from the tongue side as well as the cheek side, even better. Perhaps my favorite doo-dads are stimulents. These are triangular shaped toothpicks made of orange wood that swell and become more pliable when they absorb saliva. Again, push firmly, wherever they fit comfortably, broad side toward the gums and pointed side toward the teeth. Toothpicks (even round ones) have the added benefit of compressing the gum tissue and helping disrupt the plaque layer.

None of these implements are particularly effective in deep pockets so what can you do to prevent further bone loss there? A waterpik sends a firm jet of water between teeth and literally creates a vacuum that sucks unattached bacteria up and out. Any water rinsing helps soften plaque so it can be more easily rubbed off with floss and other interdental aids. Still... for surfaces in pocketed areas nothing compares to a professional scaling and root planing—precise instrumentation by a skilled hygienist/dentist/periodontist. And while you are there, ask for tips as you demonstrate use of your favorite interdental cleaner!