

Is wearing a mask affecting your dental health?

By Dr. Jeffrey Ganeles, DrBicuspid.com contributing writer

March 18, 2021 -- The COVID-19 pandemic has had an incredible effect on our everyday lives. It introduced phrases such as "social distancing," "lockdown," and "essential workers" into the vernacular. More recently, the phrase "mask mouth" has found its way into our common language, which some may misinterpret to mean that wearing a mask hurts our teeth.

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Those of us in the medical and dental professions who wear masks nearly every day are here to dispel what we believe is, for the most part, a slight misconception. Wearing a mask in public is important during this pandemic, but so is taking care of your teeth.

Dry mouth main culprit

Isolation at home and the disruption of our daily routines, especially during the early months of the pandemic, may have led to bad habits. Some of us addressed stress by eating more sweets and relaxing regular maintenance. Many people had to postpone dental hygiene visits. All of these actions could well lead to dental issues. But the bad smells you breathe in when wearing a mask could simply be a consequence of a drier-than-normal mouth.

Think about when you have a cold. You probably breathe more through your mouth at night and wake up with a very dry mouth. People also tend to breathe heavily through their mouths when wearing a mask. As a result, the normal saliva that helps neutralize acid in our mouth decreases. A dry mouth can lead to increased bacteria, tooth decay, and, if not addressed during regular visits with your dental professional, gum disease.



Dr. Jeffrey Ganeles.

Other causes

Certain health conditions such as diabetes, snoring, and tobacco and alcohol use can also cause dry mouth. Dry mouth can also be a side effect of many medications, especially ones used to treat depression, anxiety, colds, and allergies. Other causes include radiation treatments.

While breathing through your nose under a mask might seem counterintuitive (you smell that bad breath!), if you do so, your mouth will remain moist.

10 tips for dental health

Getting back on track with your dental professional and sticking to the following guidelines can help you feel more comfortable while protecting your teeth:

1. Throw away disposable masks and wash cloth masks. Bacteria can grow on the masks and cause odors.
2. While wearing a mask, breathe through your nose as much as possible.
3. Don't give up those critical daily oral hygiene habits such as brushing twice a day and flossing.
4. If you suspect gum disease (signs include bleeding or sore gums), contact your dental professional.
5. Garlic, onions, and other strong foods can make your breath smell foul. Consider at least rinsing your mouth after eating, before putting a mask back on, if brushing isn't feasible.
6. Hydrate by taking lots of water breaks throughout the day.
7. Eat sugar-free candy or chew sugar-free gum when possible to stimulate saliva production.
8. Limit your caffeine intake.
9. Consider using an oral rinse (many are designed specifically for dry mouth).
10. Don't forget those regular dental checkups!

We absolutely encourage our patients to wear masks to help curb the spread of infection. You'll be helping to protect yourself and others as we all fight this nasty virus.

Dr. Jeffrey Ganeles is a periodontist, board-certified in periodontics and dental implant surgery, practicing at the South Florida Center for Periodontics & Implant Dentistry. Ganeles is a fellow of the International Team for Implantology (ITI) and a fellow and member of the board of the Academy of Osseointegration. He is on the faculty of Nova Southeastern University College of Dental Medicine and Boston University Goldman School of Dental Medicine, where he teaches postdoctoral residents.

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