Benefits of Flossing Remain Largely Unproven

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The next time your dentist tells you to floss more, tell him or her to chew on this: A recent review of more than two dozen dental studies conducted during the last decade shows that thus far, evidence for flossing has been “weak” and of “very low quality” in the medical community, the Associated Press reports.

For the study, AP reporters investigated the findings of 25 studies conducted since 2006 that generally compared the use of a toothbrush alone versus a combination of brushing and flossing. The journalists found that the majority of studies failed to prove that flossing was effective in removing any plaque on teeth. And while one review in 2011 credited flossing with a slight reduction in gum inflammation, researchers said the evidence the government and dental professionals used to assert that fact was “very unreliable.”

The report also blasted both the American Dental Association (ADA) and the American Academy of Periodontology (which specializes in gum disease and implants) for citing studies that used outdated research models and too short study periods and for making official recommendations based on testing too few people. In addition, reporters charged that the organizations allowed companies with a big market share in the flossing business to design and conduct research on the topic.

Since the mid-1970s, the U.S. government, ADA and the Dietary Guidelines for Americans have recommended that flossing each day is an essential part of taking care of teeth and gums. But a law says these guidelines must be based on solid scientific evidence, and the report showed there isn’t any proof.

Still, for now, Tim Iafolla, DMD, MPH, a dentist from the National Institutes of Health, is standing by the government’s recommendations to floss. “It’s low risk, low cost,” he told the Washington Post. “We know there’s a possibility that it works, so we feel comfortable telling people to go ahead and do it.”

But there is a connection between oral care and our overall health. To learn more about how caring for your teeth and gums can help you live longer, click here.

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