

It's unlikely that floss will ever be glorified or even widely accepted, but it seems to be gaining popularity as people understand its importance. Dental floss is an ancient invention. Researchers have found dental floss and toothpick grooves in the teeth of prehistoric humans. Levi Spear Parmly, a New Orleans dentist who promoted flossing with a piece of silk thread in 1815, is credited as being the inventor of modern dental floss.

Approximately 2/3 of the surface area where plaque accumulates is between the teeth where only floss can reach. Looking at it another way, you are leaving approximately 2/3 of the bacteria on your teeth if you do not floss, even if you brush 3 times a day. Keeping these areas clean is essential in efforts to maintain or reverse periodontal problems. Flossing is also a permanent cure for approximately 85% of chronic bad breath problems.

There is evidence, though no clear proof, that flossing can help improve overall health as well. One explanation may be that gum disease, like any other chronic infection, puts a stress on the body's immune system that can gradually lead to vascular disease, heart disease, diabetes, etc. If you've ever done any "real age" quizzes you know that flossing removes 6.4 years from your age.

Rinses and chemicals are not the same as flossing and are no substitute. Do not believe otherwise. If you really cannot manage the slippery little thread, there are alternatives that sometimes work. One is a handle with forked end that you stretch the floss across, commonly known as a flossholder. Another possibility is a "flosspick." These are usually prepackaged with floss across a small holder on one end. If you have larger spaces between teeth you can also use a tiny brush on a handle (proxabrush) to clean the areas between teeth. The problem with substitutes is that some people still cannot get to the back teeth.

The biggest hurdle is just making it a habit. I tell patients to start out with small steps-- start with flossing between just the very back teeth. This is where over half of the periodontal problems originate. Then, as you make that a habit and realize how easy it is, you can move on to the others. Soon the whole family will be enjoying a good flossing after dinner.