

What Is Oil Pulling?

Analysis by [Dr. Joseph Mercola](#)

✓ Fact Checked

July 19, 2023

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- › Ayurveda practices included oil pulling to help balance your mind and body, and to strengthen your teeth and gums
- › Your oral health is tied to diabetes, cardiovascular disease, kidney disease, dementia and chronic inflammation
- › Oil pulling with coconut oil reduces bacterial growth in your mouth, strengthens your teeth and reduces inflammation in your gums

Editor's Note: This article is a reprint. It was originally published August 3, 2016.

The history of oil pulling dates back nearly 3,000 years. Before modern medicine, elders in India developed Ayurveda, a form of mind-body health system. The basic tenet of Ayurveda is that when balanced, your body has amazing powers to heal itself.

Practitioners recommend you provide your body support through a healthy diet, adequate sleep, reduced stress, strong digestive process and living in tune with your natural constitution.¹

One of the practices of Ayurveda is oil pulling, or the act of swishing and rinsing your mouth with oil. Oil pulling has been used in traditional Indian folk remedies to prevent tooth decay, bad breath, bleeding gums and to strengthen your teeth and gums.²

Benefits to Your Oral Health

Some believe oil pulling may have more extensive benefits to your health. I can't support all of those claims, but I have first-hand knowledge of how oil pulling benefits oral health as I have been pulling consistently since 2011.

Oil pulling is an effective mechanical method of cleansing your teeth and the smallest crevices along your molars that the bristles of your brush cannot reach. Your dentist may have recommended using sealants on your teeth to help prevent decay from forming in these tiny areas.

In the past, popular oils for pulling were sesame and sunflower oils. However, those are high in omega-6 fats, which you likely get enough of each day. Cold-pressed, virgin coconut oil is my oil of choice for a couple of reasons.

Bacteria is the root cause of both bad breath and cavity formation in your teeth. They have membranes that are fat-soluble and break down with the mechanical action of swishing and pulling oil. Research demonstrates that pulling oils improves the saponification, or breakdown of bacterial membranes.³

While sesame and sunflower oils may functionally break down bacteria, coconut oil adds another advantage. Coconut oil is a medium-chain fatty acid found to inhibit *Streptococcus mutans*, the chief bacteria responsible for cavities.^{4,5}

Coconut oil also protects against yeast infections in the mouth, generally referred to as thrush.^{6,7} This condition is more common if your immune system is compromised, or may be experienced by infants and nursing mothers.

Oil Pulling 101

In the video above I describe how I use oil pulling in my own oral health practices and the benefits you may experience as well.

Simply measure out about a tablespoon of coconut oil to pull. You may find this is too much or not enough, but it's a good place to start. Coconut oil is solid below 76 degrees

Fahrenheit (24.4 degrees Celsius) but will quickly liquefy once you put it into your mouth and start moving it around.

Swish the oil around your mouth, using your tongue and cheeks to pull the oil through your teeth. Try to relax your jaw muscles to avoid muscle fatigue. The action is natural and usually won't cause discomfort.

Although you'll want to use it as if it were mouthwash, you don't want to gargle it or swallow the oil you've been pulling. If you feel the urge to swallow, it's important you spit it out and start again.

As you swish the oil around your mouth it breaks down bacteria. Both saliva and bacteria become incorporated into the oil, which is why you don't want to swallow the oil as you swish. After approximately 20 minutes the oil begins to get thick and milky white.

Spit the oil into your garbage can or outdoors. I spit it out in the yard, making sure I don't get it on my plants. Although your saliva is combined with the oil, the liquid may still be oily enough to coat your plumbing and cause a blockage or cause water to drain more slowly. In time, oil pulling can become as natural as brushing your teeth.

By increasing the pH in your mouth after pulling you may reduce bacterial growth even further. To do that, mix 1 teaspoon of baking soda in 6 ounces of water and gargle. This will alkalize the pH of your mouth, and since bacteria thrive in an acidic environment, the increased pH will discourage growth.

Why I Don't Recommend Fluoridated Toothpaste

Fluoride has been added to water supplies and toothpaste, and offered as treatment in your dental office for years as an answer to stop tooth decay. However, in more recent years fluoride has come under close scrutiny, and for good reason.

One groundbreaking study demonstrated the fluorapatite layer formed on your teeth by fluoride-containing toothpaste is only 6 nanometers thick.⁸

To put this in perspective, it would take 10,000 of these layers to achieve the width of a single strand of your hair. Researchers now question if this ultra-thin layer may actually protect your enamel, considering the simple act of chewing quickly eliminates the fluorapatite layer from your teeth.

Other substances in toothpaste have greater success with repair and re-mineralization of dentin (the tissue below your enamel that makes up the bulk of your tooth) than fluoride toothpaste.⁹

Fluoride toothpaste may also be the single largest source of fluoride ingestion in young children, a major risk factor for disfiguring dental fluorosis. According to research, it's not uncommon for young children to swallow more fluoride from toothpaste than is recommended for the entire day from all sources.¹⁰

Science has clearly demonstrated that swallowing fluoride is detrimental to your and your children's health. It is a toxic chemical that accumulates in your tissues over time, changing your enzymes and producing serious neurological and endocrine dysfunction.^{11,12,13,14}

Children are particularly sensitive to the adverse effects of overexposure to fluoride. Therefore, if you have young children it's recommended you use a non-fluoride toothpaste, or teach them to brush their teeth with coconut oil too.

Fluoride builds up in your body as well as your child's, so it's a good idea that you use non-fluoride toothpaste as well.

The Impact Dental Health Has on Your Physical Health

Your oral health has a profound systemic effect on your physical health. Your mouth can be viewed as a window to your health, as you can easily assess the health of your gums and soft tissue.¹⁵ As noted by the 2000 Executive Summary from the Surgeon General:¹⁶

"The past half century has seen the meaning of oral health evolve from a narrow focus on teeth and gingiva to the recognition that the mouth is the center of

vital tissues and functions that are critical to total health and well-being across the life span.

The mouth as a mirror of health or disease, as a sentinel or early warning system, as an accessible model for the study of other tissues and organs and as a potential source of pathology affecting other systems and organs ..."

Your mouth is an entry way for pathogens and toxins. Recent research demonstrates oral infections are linked to diabetes, cardiovascular disease and adverse pregnancy outcomes.^{17,18}

Poor dental health may also increase your risk of dementia.¹⁹ Researchers theorize that the trigger may be periodontal or gum disease. Data on more than 4,000 adults over age 65 years old were evaluated, and those with the fewest teeth without dentures had a far higher risk of dementia than those with 20 or more teeth.

Periodontal disease is a chronic inflammatory condition that affects more than just your mouth. Research has found a reciprocal relationship between the need for diabetes medication and periodontal disease in diabetics.²⁰ Treatment of periodontal disease reduced the need for insulin in this study.

In another study, scientists found a link between periodontal disease and an increased risk of chronic kidney disease.²¹ Individuals with gum disease developed chronic kidney disease at four times the rate of those without gum disease.

A Comprehensive Oral Health Plan

Caring for your teeth and gums is an essential part of your overall health and wellness. It's important to address nutrition, oral care and the products you use. Here are some general guidelines that can help you improve your oral health:

- Reduce your **net carbohydrate intake** to meet your insulin level requirements. I suggest you reduce your overall net carbs – i.e. your total grams of carbohydrates minus your grams of fiber intake – if your fasting insulin level is over 5.

Avoid carbs like beans, legumes, and grains such as rice, quinoa and oats, as well as highly-processed grain products like bread, pasta, cereal, chips, bagels and fries. These begin digestion in the mouth and impact the health of your teeth. Limit fructose intake to 25 grams or less. Even fructose found in fresh fruit should be limited.

- Use toothpaste containing natural ingredients, such as coconut oil, baking soda and essential oils. There is no real reason to expose yourself to dangerous chemicals, such as fluoride, when other natural alternatives are easily available, highly effective and cost efficient.
- Eat a diet rich in fresh, whole foods, grass-fed meats and fermented vegetables. This helps ensure you get plenty of minerals for strong bones and teeth.
- Floss and brush daily. Brush your teeth gently as over brushing along the gum line can cause the gum tissue to recede and develop pockets along the teeth. These are prime areas for bacterial growth.
- Pull with coconut oil once a day for at least 20 minutes to reduce bacterial growth, strengthen your teeth, reduce bad breath and lower your risk of gum disease.

Sources and References

- ¹ [What Is Ayurveda?. \(2016\). chopra.com. Retrieved 22 July 2016](#)
- ² [Journal Of Ayurveda And Integrative Medicine, 2\(2\), 64](#)
- ³ [Mechanism of oil-pulling therapy - in vitro study. - PubMed - NCBI. Ncbi.nlm.nih.gov](#)
- ⁴ [J Indian Soc Pedod Prev Dent. 2008 Mar;26\(1\):12-7](#)
- ⁵ [The Effect of Coconut Oil pulling on Streptococcus mutans Count in Saliva in Comparison with Chlorhexidine Mouthwash](#)
- ⁶ [In vitro antimicrobial properties of coconut oil on Candida species in Ibadan, Nigeria. - PubMed - NCBI. Ncbi.nlm.nih.gov](#)
- ⁷ [In Vitro Killing of Candida albicans by Fatty Acids and Monoglycerides. Antimicrobial Agents And Chemotherapy, 45\(11\), 3209-3212](#)
- ⁸ [Elemental depth profiling of fluoridated hydroxyapatite: saving your dentition by the skin of your teeth? - PubMed - NCBI. Ncbi.nlm.nih.gov](#)
- ⁹ [Breaking Human Clinical Trial Reveals That An Extract From Chocolate Is Actually More Effective Than Fluoride For Treating Dental Hypersensitivity](#)

- ¹⁰ Fluoride Action Network | Fluoride Intake from Toothpaste vs. Recommended Daily Intake from All Sources
- ¹¹ Impact of fluoride on neurological development in children | News | Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health
- ¹² Fluoride Action Network | Brain. (2016). Fluoridealert.org
- ¹³ Fluoride Action Network | Endocrine System. (2016). Fluoridealert.org
- ¹⁴ Fluoride in Drinking Water. (2006)
- ¹⁵ Ormond Beach Periodontics
- ¹⁶ Oral Health in America: A Report of the Surgeon General (Executive Summary). (2000)
- ¹⁷ Part Three: What Is the Relationship Between Oral Health and General Health and Well-being?. (2016)
- ¹⁸ 6 Ways Oral Hygiene Affects The Rest Of Your Body. (2011). The Huffington Post. Retrieved 23 July 2016
- ¹⁹ Poor Dental Health Linked to Dementia Onset. (2016). Medscape
- ²⁰ Diabetologia. 2012; 55(1): 21–31
- ²¹ Mind Your Mouth: How Oral Health Affects Overall Health. (2016). US News & World Report