

Lighter Side



Brushing (Almost) Anywhere

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Editor's Note: *Miriam Neuman is a graduate and mentor from the University of Manitoba dental hygiene program. She loves being innovative in a part-time general practice in Winnipeg, and she is the creator of the Instagram #brushanywhere campaign promoting "dry brushing that can be done on the go" and thinking "outside the box 4 toothcare." Here is her story:*

My client, a young man in his 30s, opens his mouth for me. His gums are unhappy looking, angry, swollen, and red. I am secretly wondering how I am going to get through to this man, if at all. He is university educated and obviously intelligent. "You look a bit rough. What's been happening since I saw you last?" I venture carefully. And the story is revealed.

"Ah, my teeth might need some cleaning," he says somewhat apologetically. "I just returned from a dig in the Chihuahuan Desert of New Mexico. We had limited potable water, so I didn't brush much for the last month."

It is true that there are certain unwritten rules about brushing. This man, like many of our clients, believes that brushing requires toothpaste. Other ingrained rules might be that brushing is for morning and night or that it has to be after meals or that it has to happen in a bathroom or at least with water.

A lightbulb moment for me occurs. None of this HAS to be. What if we could take away all these rules? What if just a toothbrush is needed? What if there is no set time or place (within reason) for brushing? Then suddenly there would be so many more opportunities for clients to choose to actually brush. I needed to encourage people to think outside the brushing box. And I just needed them to brush regularly. Period.



So out loud to this client, I said, "Did you know you can remove all your plaque without toothpaste with just a toothbrush? Think about it. If toothpaste were that magical, you'd be able to rinse with it and we wouldn't need to brush!" He looks at me like I'm crazy person. I assure him that I am not removing toothpaste from the equation but that a nice, soft brush and proper technique will absolutely do the trick.

The need for regular fluoride and, in many cases, desensitizers necessitates the use of toothpaste but I have been instinctively brushing without toothpaste at least once a day for years. And in 1998, my dry brushing was validated by Trisha O'Hehir and Jean Suvan's study, "Dry Brushing Lingual Surfaces First," in which mean plaque and calculus scores were improved significantly by "brushing the inside of their bottom teeth first with a dry toothbrush. When their



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mouths felt clean and tasted clean, clients rinsed their brushes with water and brushed again with toothpaste."¹

I immediately began adding this advice to regular oral hygiene instruction for my clients. It sparked a really different way of thinking, because it put more emphasis on actual technique. I began to encourage them to be more thoughtful and to depend on "tongue feel" over mint taste to determine cleanliness. I took it a step further and suggested that they could choose somewhere other than standing (perhaps impatiently) in the bathroom, where they could relax, and take their time to brush. My recession-prone clients were given permission to chill and loosen their grip on their toothbrush and slow down their brush strokes. This approach suddenly provided more options, more times, and more places for tooth care. Clients could sit down to brush. They could lie down in bed if tired or watch TV or read emails while brushing. If they dared, they could brush on a plane, train, long distance bus ride with only their passports and brushes in their pocket. It was no longer an annoying or tedious activity but one associated with what I lovingly call "spa time for your teeth"!

That is how my Instagram #brushanywhere campaign was born. It's my new platform to showcase my somewhat crazy public practices in the name of oral hygiene promotion. I've taken dry brushing just one step further, sometimes to the silly or ridiculous, brushing my pearlies in a canoe, with a jar of pickles at a grocery store or in the volunteer dining tent at my local folk fest. My clients see that I am walking my talk. I tell them about how I carry my toothbrush with me in my purse, keep another on my microwave downstairs and a third in my glove compartment in my car. They laugh when I tell them about the time I was brushing my teeth while stopped at a train crossing and looked over to see the guy in the next car watching me...and laughing. It's advertising. It makes people think. I think it really resonates in a new, fun, and playful way.

Some get it. Some don't. But some really, really do get it. And they get to laugh at me. I don't mind. As long as people figure out their own way to just pick up a brush. And do a great brush. Period. •

Reference

1. O'Hehir TE, Suvan JE. Dry brushing lingual surfaces first. *J Am Dent Assoc.* 1998;129(5):614. Available from: [jada.ada.org/article/S0002-8177\(14\)65639-7/abstract](http://jada.ada.org/article/S0002-8177(14)65639-7/abstract)

