

Does Mouthwash Do the Same Job as Flossing?

By Joy of Dentistry Health Desk · 6 min read

It is a tempting shortcut. Flossing is fiddly, it takes time, and plenty of people quietly dislike it. A rinse, by contrast, takes ten seconds and leaves the mouth feeling clean. So the question comes up often, usually phrased hopefully: can mouthwash just do the job instead?

The honest answer is that mouthwash and flossing are not interchangeable, because they are not doing the same thing. Understanding why comes down to a single word that does a lot of work in dentistry: biofilm.

Why rinsing and cleaning between teeth are different tasks

Plaque is not a loose dusting of debris that a swish can carry away. It is a biofilm — a structured, sticky layer of bacteria that adheres firmly to the tooth surface and builds up over hours. Mature biofilm is physically attached and protected by its own matrix, which makes it fairly resistant to simply being rinsed off.

That is the crux of the comparison. Cleaning between the teeth is a mechanical job: floss or an interdental brush physically scrapes the biofilm off the surfaces where it clings. Mouthwash is chemical: an antiseptic rinse may reduce or slow the bacteria it reaches, but liquid does not scrub. It flows over surfaces rather than disrupting the film stuck to them.

The spots a rinse struggles to clean

The surfaces between teeth, and the area just under the gumline, are precisely where biofilm likes to accumulate and where a toothbrush cannot reach. These contact points are tight, and the film that forms there is the same kind implicated in cavities between teeth and in gum inflammation.

Swishing liquid past those contact points does not reliably remove an attached biofilm from the surfaces facing each other. The rinse largely washes over the film rather than dislodging it. This is the core reason a rinse is not considered a substitute for cleaning between the teeth.

There is a timing element too. Biofilm is not static — it matures. In its first hours it is thinner and more loosely organized, but left undisturbed it thickens, becomes more firmly attached, and its outer layers help shield the bacteria deeper inside. A rinse has the hardest time with exactly the

mature, settled film that cleaning between teeth is meant to disrupt. Over days, undisturbed biofilm can also begin to mineralize into tartar, which no rinse removes at all and which requires professional cleaning to take off.

So is mouthwash pointless?

Not at all — and this is where the "myth" needs handling carefully in both directions. Dismissing mouthwash entirely would be as misleading as treating it as a floss replacement. The accurate framing is that it plays a supporting role, not a starring one.

Different rinses are formulated for different purposes, and it helps to know which you are reaching for.

- **Fluoride rinses** are designed to help strengthen enamel and reduce the risk of decay. Their job is mineral support, not plaque scrubbing.
- **Antiseptic/antibacterial rinses** aim to reduce bacteria in the mouth and can help manage gum inflammation as an addition to brushing and interdental cleaning — not instead of them.
- **Cosmetic rinses** mainly freshen breath and leave a pleasant feeling. They are not meaningfully therapeutic.

Used alongside mechanical cleaning, a rinse can be a worthwhile addition for some people. Used instead of it, it leaves the attached biofilm between teeth largely in place.

A simple way to think about the roles

A useful comparison: brushing and interdental cleaning are like physically wiping down a dirty counter, while mouthwash is more like spraying a disinfectant mist over the room. The mist may reduce what is floating around, but it does not remove the grime that is stuck to the surface. You still need to wipe.

Task	Floss / interdental brush	Mouthwash
Removes attached biofilm between teeth	Yes — mechanically	Not reliably
Reaches just under the gumline between teeth	Yes	Limited
Can reduce bacteria it contacts	Indirectly, by removing film	Yes, depending on formula
Delivers fluoride to enamel	No	Some formulas
Freshens breath briefly	Indirectly	Yes

What this means for your routine

For most people, the foundation stays the same: brush twice a day with a fluoride toothpaste, and clean between the teeth once a day with floss or an interdental brush. If flossing feels awkward, the fix is usually a different tool — interdental brushes, floss picks, or a water flosser can suit different hands and different gaps — rather than swapping to a rinse.

Mouthwash can then sit on top of that as a complement, if your dentist or hygienist suggests one for your situation. Some people are advised to use an antibacterial rinse while managing gum inflammation; others benefit from a fluoride rinse because of a higher decay risk. These are individual decisions.

It is also worth remembering that home care, however good, does not reach hardened deposits or every hidden surface. A professional cleaning removes what has mineralized into tartar and lets a clinician check the areas you cannot see. If you are not sure your between-teeth cleaning is reaching where it should, that is a reasonable thing to raise during [a hygiene visit](#), where someone can look directly and show you a technique suited to your mouth.

A note on technique is worth adding, because a rinse sometimes gets blamed for breath or gum issues it was never going to solve. Persistent bad breath, bleeding gums, or a film that returns quickly can be signs that the mechanical cleaning is not reaching where it needs to, rather than evidence that a stronger mouthwash is required. Reaching for a more potent rinse in those cases can mask a problem that would be better addressed by improving how, and how thoroughly, you clean between the teeth.

As always, individual needs differ. Someone with crowded teeth, bridgework, braces, or gum concerns may need a tailored approach, and a dentist's in-person assessment is the right basis for that rather than a general rule.

Frequently asked questions

Can mouthwash replace flossing?

No. Flossing or interdental cleaning mechanically removes the sticky biofilm that clings between teeth and just under the gumline. Mouthwash is a liquid that flows over surfaces and does not reliably scrub that attached film away. The two do different jobs, so a rinse is an addition rather than a substitute.

Does rinsing clean between my teeth?

Only in a limited way. A rinse may reduce some bacteria it contacts and can carry away loose debris, but it does not dislodge mature biofilm attached to the surfaces facing each other between teeth. Physical cleaning is still needed there.

Is there any point using mouthwash at all?

Yes, for the right purpose. Fluoride rinses can support enamel and reduce decay risk, and antibacterial rinses can help manage gum inflammation alongside brushing and interdental cleaning. The key is treating a rinse as a complement to mechanical cleaning, not a replacement for it.

What if I really cannot manage floss?

Many people find string floss awkward. Interdental brushes, floss picks, or a water flosser may be easier and can clean between teeth effectively for some people. A dentist or hygienist can help you find a tool that fits your hands and the spacing of your teeth.

Sources & further reading

- [Canadian Dental Association — Flossing and Brushing](#) — guidance on daily cleaning and why cleaning between teeth matters.
- [Canadian Dental Association — Oral Health resources](#) — plain-language information on plaque, gum health, and home care.
- [Government of Canada — Gum disease](#) — how plaque contributes to gum problems and how to help prevent them.