

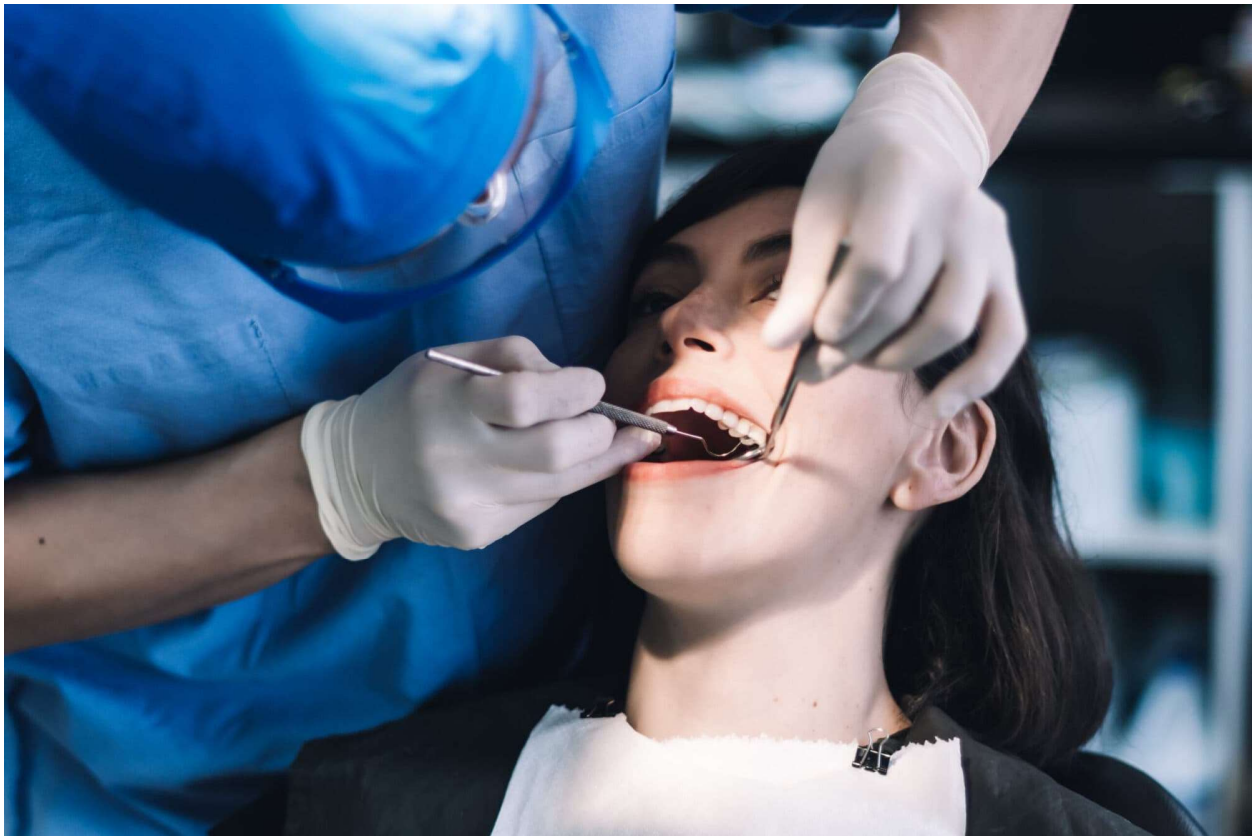
OPINION

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Give Yourself a New Year Gift: Visit the Dentist

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Dentist observes a patient's teeth during a dental cleaning. Jon Vallejo/Getty Images

The holiday season has come and gone. Now, people are focusing on 2024 and how they can make positive changes in their life. There is something that you can do for yourself that you will be rewarded many times over throughout the year: Make an appointment with your dentist.

Our mouth is the gateway of nutrition for our bodies. It contains [hundreds of species of microbes](#), most of which are benign. There are some, however, that fuel tooth decay and gum disease, which can create [health problems](#) that impact our entire body.

Survival demands that we ingest food, providing the necessary vitamins, minerals, and calories that give us energy and health. The job that our teeth perform is what makes it possible for food that we eat to be prepared for its journey through our gut, feeding our body to keep us alive and active.

Yet, many of us avoid the dentist like we would the plague. Over [one-third of adults say that they fear dental treatment](#), many suffering from a condition called dentophobia, an irrational fear of dentists. Such people are overcome with anxiety when confronted with a dental exam, which may lead to a cavity requiring treatment. Just the sound of a dental drill or the [smells that permeate the dental exam room](#) can send such people into a state of anxiety and panic.

The problem that this creates is that by staying away from the dentist, we are fulfilling and feeding our worst fears. By avoiding the dentist, the [health of our teeth and gums](#) deteriorates, ultimately leading to the need for more advanced treatments, with the associated pain and discomfort that will frequently be time-consuming and expensive.

Poor [oral health](#) is also associated with numerous seemingly unrelated health issues. This includes [higher risks of cardiovascular events like strokes, diabetes, Alzheimer's disease](#), and for pregnant women, [premature birth and low birth weight](#). The reasons for such associations are not fully understood, although they provide an added incentive to pay attention to our oral health.

The good news is that [most people value dental care](#). Around three-quarters of adults plan to visit a dentist in the coming years, with almost two-thirds having seen a dentist in the past year. Regular preventive maintenance oral health removes the buildup of [tartar and plaque on our teeth and around our gumlines](#) that ultimately keep our teeth and gums healthy. It also helps to identify possible problems that are brewing in our mouth, which can be short circuited before they grow into major issues of concern.

Taking care of our teeth requires diligence and effort. Daily [brushing and flossing](#) is something that everyone can do to make a dentist visit go that much smoother. A question often asked, should we [brush or floss first](#) (the answer: floss before brushing), has been resolved.

During the pandemic, many dentist offices temporarily closed or scaled back their hours, as evidenced by the [average dentist working 15% fewer hours in 2020 compared to 2019](#). This made it more difficult for many people to maintain regular preventive maintenance dental care from a professional. It also gave some a convenient excuse to ignore their teeth and gums.

Such excuses no longer apply. Dentist offices are once again open for business to provide the care needed to keep your teeth and gums healthy.

After a teeth cleaning, your mouth feels fresh and clean. Running your tongue across your cleaned and polished teeth gives you a feeling that you may wish could last indefinitely — rather than just until your next meal.

Do yourself a favor this year and visit your dentist. The benefits that it will provide you will keep giving throughout the year.

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