

# Top 5 back-to-school tips for your oral health

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It's that time of year again: back-to-school and back to the books. While you're busy buying your texts at the Dal Bookstore and getting organized for (and, sometimes, stressed out about) your classes, your oral health can sometimes often be overlooked. From our experts in the Faculty of Dentistry, are the five things you should consider this fall to keep your teeth, gums and mouth healthy.

## **1. Manage your stress**

With September comes papers, juggling classes and (in due time) exams. As the stress starts to pile up, so can the effect it has on your body. You'll often feel it in the forms of headaches, muscle pain or jaw pain.

Teeth grinding can be a main contributor to these aches and pains. Although most [teeth](#) grinding occurs during sleep, stress and anxiety can lead to prolonged grinding which can damage teeth and cause other [oral health](#) implications.

If stress is causing your teeth grinding, ask your dentist about options to reduce your stress. Avoid or cutback on foods that contain caffeine such as colas and coffee. Don't chew on pens, pencils or anything that isn't food. If you notice yourself grinding your teeth or clenching them during the day, position the tip of your tongue between your teeth. This trains the muscles in your jaw to relax.

## **2. Watch your alcohol consumption**

For the 19-plus crowd, back-to-school can mean more socializing with friends over beverages. Overconsumption of alcohol does more than just affect your liver—it can have negative effects on your teeth as well.

Due to its high sugar and acid content, frequent consumption of alcohol can lead to increased [tooth decay](#). The sugars from alcohol pose the biggest threat to your teeth which, when broken down in your [mouth](#), can create the ideal acidic environment for bacteria to breed.

Some tips to combat the effects of alcohol include alternating [alcoholic drinks](#) with water or using water as the mix. Water increases saliva flow and can rinse away sugars and acid in your mouth. If you often forget to brush your teeth after a night out, leave a toothbrush on your pillow to give you a reminder.

### **3. Be careful with energy drinks**

While trying to get back in the swing of waking up for those early morning classes, grabbing an energy drink may not be your best option for a number of reasons.

Most [energy drinks](#) are loaded with citric acid, preservatives and sugar. These drinks can wreck havoc on your teeth and gums and lead to tooth decay, tooth sensitivity and cavities. Over time, energy drinks can also strip the enamel from your teeth.

If you do have to have an energy drink, drink it through a straw and don't hold the drink in your mouth before swallowing. Afterward, rinse your mouth out with water, which will help to neutralize the acid and increase saliva production. The best advice however, is to refrain from drinking energy drinks all together. Water is one of the best hydrators, a natural energy-booster and doesn't contain any calories.

### **4. Protect yourself on the sport field/court/rink/etc.**

Fall often means the start of getting back into organized sports. It's important to remember to protect your mouth while you get back on the field.

A mouth guard is recommended for contact sports like hockey, soccer, basketball, football, rugby and lacrosse. Mouth guards not only protect the teeth, but they could also help prevent serious injuries such as jaw fractures, concussions and neck injuries. Many athletes opt not to wear a mouth guard because of bulkiness or poor fit. If this is the case, talk to your dentist about a custom-made mouth guard; this will provide the best fit, protection and comfort. Other options include boil and bite mouth guards and stock/ready made mouth guards.

## 5. It's all about routine

Fall can be a great time to get back into routine. It's a good time to start booking those hygiene and dental appointments and ensure brushing and flossing are part of your everyday routine.

A lot of students study late into the night and getting ready for bed is a scramble for much needed sleep. To avoid missing your nightly brush and floss, try taking a study break earlier in the evening once you know you're finished consuming foods and beverages to brush and floss. You should brush for at least two minutes. A good way to time this is to brush for the full duration of your favourite song. Instead of flossing in the bathroom, you can floss while studying. Or, if you're watching television, make it a habit to floss during the first commercial break.

Provided by Dalhousie University

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