

The Oral-Care Buyer's Checklist

How to choose a toothbrush, water flosser, mouthwash, whitening kit or night guard that actually works, and which marketing claims to ignore.

The oral-care aisle is designed to confuse you: "clinically proven", "dentist recommended", "advanced whitening". Most of it is noise. Dental research is clear about the handful of features that matter for each product, and they are usually not the expensive ones. This checklist gives you those features, in order, so you can decide in two minutes.

Inside

1. The 4 rules that apply to every product (page 2)
2. Electric toothbrushes: what matters, what doesn't (page 2)
3. Water flossers, for braces, implants and everyone else (page 3)
4. Mouthwash: cosmetic vs. therapeutic (page 3)
5. Whitening kits: the only ingredient that works (page 4)
6. Night guards: custom vs. boil-and-bite (page 4)
7. Your printable checklist and budget tiers (page 5)

The one symbol worth looking for

The **ADA Seal of Acceptance** means the American Dental Association reviewed the manufacturer's evidence that the product is safe and does what it claims. It is voluntary, so good products exist without it, but a product that carries it has cleared a bar most never attempt. The ADA keeps a searchable list at ada.org/resources/research/science/ada-seal-of-acceptance.

PART 1

Four rules that apply to everything

1. **Technique beats technology.** Two minutes, twice a day, with a soft brush and fluoride toothpaste outperforms any gadget used badly. Buy the product that makes good technique easier, not the one with the most modes.
2. **Look for the active ingredient or the mechanism, not the adjective.** "Whitening", "repair" and "advanced" are unregulated words. "Fluoride 1,450 ppm", "hydrogen peroxide 10%", "cetylpyridinium chloride" are facts.
3. **Replacement cost is the real price.** A \$40 brush with \$8 heads costs more over three years than a \$90 brush with \$3 heads. Check the refill price before the handle price.
4. **If it hurts, stop.** Sensitivity from whitening, bleeding that gets worse with a new flosser, or jaw pain from a guard means wrong product or wrong use. Pain is not "working".

PART 2

Electric toothbrushes

What actually matters

- **Key** **Soft bristles.** Medium or hard bristles wear enamel and gums over years. This is the single most important feature, and the cheapest.
- **Key** **A 2-minute timer** with 30-second pacing. Most people brush for 45 seconds without one.
- **Key** **Pressure sensor** if you have receding gums or sensitivity. Over-brushing is the main cause of recession in otherwise healthy mouths.
- **Useful** **Oscillating-rotating or sonic:** both beat manual in studies; the difference between them is small. Pick the one that feels comfortable.

What you can ignore

- **Skip** Bluetooth apps, "AI coaching", position tracking.
- **Skip** More than two cleaning modes. Daily clean and sensitive are enough.
- **Skip** Travel cases, UV sanitizers, charging glasses.
- **Skip** "Whitening" brush heads. Whitening comes from peroxide, not bristles.

Buying rule

Soft head + timer + pressure sensor, from a brand whose replacement heads cost under \$5 each. Everything above that is comfort, not health.

Water flossers

A water flosser does not replace string floss for most people, but for **braces, implants, bridges, and anyone who will not floss**, it is the difference between cleaning between teeth and not cleaning at all.

What actually matters

- **Key** **Adjustable pressure** with a genuinely low setting. New users and bleeding gums need to start low.
- **Key** **The right tip:** an orthodontic tip for braces, a soft rubber tip (often called "Plaque Seeker" or implant tip) for implants and bridges.
- **Key** **Reservoir time of 60+ seconds** so you finish the whole mouth without refilling. Countertop units win here; cordless units trade capacity for convenience.
- **Useful** ADA Seal: several countertop and cordless models carry it.

What you can ignore

- **Skip** More than 5 pressure levels; you will use two.
- **Skip** "Massage mode" and LED displays.
- **Skip** Ultra-cheap no-name units: the common failure is a leaking reservoir within months, and there is no warranty to call.

Buying rule

Countertop if it lives by a sink, cordless if it has to travel or fit a small bathroom. Make sure the tip you need is in the box or sold separately.

Mouthwash

Mouthwash is either **cosmetic** (freshens breath for an hour) or **therapeutic** (contains an ingredient that changes something in your mouth). The label tells you which.

You want to...	Look for	Notes
Reduce cavities	Fluoride (0.05% sodium fluoride daily rinse)	Use at a different time from brushing so you do not rinse away toothpaste fluoride.
Reduce plaque and gingivitis	Essential oils (eucalyptol, menthol, thymol) or CPC (cetylpyridinium chloride)	Alcohol-free versions work as well for most people and sting less.
Treat gum disease short-term	Chlorhexidine 0.12% (prescription)	Two weeks max unless your dentist says otherwise; it stains teeth with longer use.
Dry mouth	Alcohol-free, with xylitol or moisturizing agents	Alcohol makes dry mouth worse.

Skip "Total care", "12-in-1" and color alone. A blue liquid with nothing from this table is a breath mint.

Whitening kits

Only one thing whitens teeth from inside the enamel: **peroxide** (hydrogen peroxide, or carbamide peroxide which breaks down into it). Everything else, charcoal, "whitening" toothpaste, blue LED lights on their own, oil pulling, removes surface stain at best or does nothing.

What actually matters

- **Key** **Peroxide concentration stated on the box.** Over-the-counter strips are usually 6–14% hydrogen peroxide; trays 10–22% carbamide (roughly a third as strong). More is faster but more sensitive, not whiter in the end.
- **Key** **Contact time and a full course** (usually 10–20 days). Results come from consistency, not from one strong session.
- **Key** **ADA Seal:** a few strip brands carry it, which settles the safety question.
- **Useful** A sensitivity toothpaste (potassium nitrate) for the two weeks of treatment.

What you can ignore

- **Skip** LED lights sold alone or as the "accelerator". Studies find little to no extra effect beyond the gel.
- **Skip** Charcoal powders and pastes: abrasive, no bleaching effect, can dull enamel over time.
- **Skip** Anything that will not state its peroxide percentage.

Do not whiten if

you have untreated cavities, exposed roots, a healing extraction socket, or you are pregnant. Crowns, veneers and fillings do not change color, so whitening can leave them looking darker next to natural teeth.

Night guards for grinding

Grinding (bruxism) wears teeth flat, cracks fillings and causes morning jaw pain and headaches. A guard does not stop grinding; it moves the wear from your teeth onto a replaceable piece of plastic. That is worth a great deal.

Boil-and-bite, \$15–\$40

Good first step for mild grinding. Choose a **slim** model (thick ones trigger more clenching) and replace every 6–12 months. If it is bulky or you take it out in your sleep, move up.

Mail-in custom, \$100–\$200

You take an impression at home and a lab makes a custom guard. Fit is close to dentist-made at a third of the price. Look for a remake guarantee and a choice of soft vs. hard material.

Dentist-made, \$300–\$800

Best for heavy grinders, TMJ pain, or when teeth are already cracked. Hard acrylic lasts 3–5 years. Some dental insurance covers part of it (code D9944–D9946).

- **Key** **Hard or dual-layer** material for heavy grinders; soft guards can increase clenching.
- **Key** Wear it on one arch only (usually upper) unless a dentist says otherwise.
- **Skip** Sports mouthguards for sleeping, and anything marketed for both snoring and grinding.

Your two-minute checklist

Print this page or keep it on your phone. If a product fails a "Key" line, put it back.

Electric toothbrush

- ☐ Soft bristles
- ☐ 2-minute timer with pacing
- ☐ Pressure sensor (if gums recede or bleed)
- ☐ Replacement heads under \$5 each

Water flosser

- ☐ Adjustable pressure with a low setting
- ☐ Correct tip for braces / implants included
- ☐ 60+ seconds of water per fill
- ☐ Warranty from a real brand

Mouthwash

- ☐ Names its active ingredient on the label
- ☐ Matches my goal (fluoride, essential oils / CPC, dry mouth)
- ☐ Alcohol-free if my mouth is dry or sensitive

Whitening kit

- ☐ States its peroxide percentage
- ☐ Full course of 10–20 days included
- ☐ No cavities, exposed roots or healing sockets right now
- ☐ Not relying on an LED light to do the work

Night guard

- ☐ Slim profile, upper arch
- ☐ Hard or dual-layer if I grind heavily
- ☐ Remake or fit guarantee (custom)
- ☐ Replacement plan: 6–12 months (boil-and-bite), 3–5 years (custom)

Budget tiers that make sense

Essentials, under \$60: soft electric brush with timer, fluoride rinse, slim boil-and-bite guard if you grind.

Upgrade, \$100–\$200: add a countertop water flosser and a peroxide strip course.

Complete, \$250+: brush with pressure sensor, flosser, mail-in custom guard, ADA-Seal whitening.

What's next

Over the next few days we will send one short email per product category: our researched picks that pass this checklist, the common mistakes that waste the first month, and how to maintain each product so it lasts. Reply to any email; a real person reads every message.

GoFixTeeth.com is reader-supported. Our product guides contain affiliate links; if you buy through them we may earn a commission at no extra cost to you. Picks are based on published research, ADA acceptance and verified owner feedback, never on commission. Full disclosure: gofixteeth.com/affiliate-disclosure/. This guide is general information and is not a substitute for advice from your dentist.