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CBS

Should You Use an Electric Toothbrush or a Manual?

What to know about cost, effectiveness, and safety when you're choosing

By Sally Wadyka



If there's one point that dental professionals all agree on, it's this: Brushing your teeth for 2 minutes, twice a day, is the most effective step you can take for oral health. This helps get rid of bacteria that causes plaque, a sticky, germy film that adheres to teeth. When plaque builds up, it can cause tooth decay as well as gum disease.

But ever since the advent of the electric toothbrush—battery-operated devices whose bristles vibrate or rotate rapidly—in the 1960s, debate has raged over whether powered or manual brushes do a better job at cleaning teeth. And whether one type is safer than another for your teeth and gums. Despite the current glut of advertisements for electric, or powered, devices, manual brushes are still by far the most common. According to a recent report by Mintel, a consumer marketing analysis firm, only 36 percent of adults say that they use a powered toothbrush. But powered brushes become more popular as both age and income increase.

According to Mintel, almost half of people 55 and older with annual incomes of \$75,000 or more prefer powered brushes to manual ones. There are, of course, cost differences. You can buy a manual toothbrush for less than a dollar, and basic powered models—which run on replaceable batteries—can be had for less than \$10. Those with rechargeable batteries (for which a single charge lasts anywhere from a few days to several weeks) start

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as low as \$20. But you can spend more than \$250 for high-end "smart" powered toothbrushes that sync with an app on your phone, and offer recommendations on improving your brushing technique.

Which should you choose? Dental experts point out that each has its pros and cons, and that personal preferences and factors such as your age and general health might play a role in what kind of toothbrush is best for you. Here, what to know and how to decide what's right for keeping your pearly whites strong, clean, and cavity-free. Do Powered Brushes Clean Better? One of the more comprehensive analyses of the topic—a 2014 review of studies by the independent Cochrane Collaboration—gave powered brushes a slight edge at cleaning away plaque.



A German study, published in 2019 in the journal *Clinical Periodontology*, found that powered brushes were more effective for gum health. Here, researchers at University Medicine Greifswald, who followed 2,819 adults over 11 years, determined that using a powered toothbrush reduced the progression of periodontal disease. Plus, electric toothbrush users had healthier gums overall and retained 19 percent more teeth over the study period than those using manual brushes.

That said, "You can brush very effectively with a manual toothbrush," notes Matt Messina, D.D.S., a consumer adviser with the American Dental Association (ADA). "If you get good checkups and your dentist is confident, you're doing a thorough job, you don't need to change from a manual brush."

Can Electrics Hurt Your Teeth?

Powered brushes can be very, well, powerful, which explains why they can do such a thorough job on plaque. But too much power may also be potentially problematic. A 2017 study, published in the journal *PLOS One*, found that powered brushes were more likely than manual to abrade dentin—the tissue directly below the tooth's enamel, which can become exposed when enamel wears away or gums recede. Abrasions to the dentin increase tooth sensitivity and can hike cavity risks. For the study, researchers took dentin samples from teeth and then used a machine that simulated the effects of eight-and-a-half years of brushing. They found that sonic toothbrushes caused the most abrasion to the dentin, followed by oscillating, and that manual brushes—especially those with rippled bristles—created the least.

Another simulated brushing study, this one published in 2013 in the journal *Clinical Oral Investigations*, had somewhat different results. It found that manual and powered brushes had similar effects on intact enamel, but that on worn enamel, manual toothbrushing abraded dentin more. But there's an important caveat: In this study, the manual brushing simulation used a lot more force than the powered brush simulation. And experts say that brushing too forcefully with any kind of brush may increase the likelihood of gum recession and damaged tooth enamel.

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In fact, a gentle touch with a soft-bristled brush—whether manual or electric—is the safest bet. “It doesn’t take much force to brush away bacteria and food particles,” says Vera W. L. Tang, D.D.S., clinical assistant professor, vice-chair and predoctoral director at the New York University College of Dentistry, department of periodontology and implant dentistry. And that may be especially important to keep in mind with powered brushes. “When you brush with a powered toothbrush, you don’t really have to do anything because the rotating or vibrating head does the work for you,” Tang says.

Vocabulary:

Should You Use an Electric Toothbrush or a Manual?

Get rid of: deshacerse de/ acabar con

Decay: caries

Gum: encía

Bristles: cerdas

Glut: exceso

Abrade: desgastar

Caveat: advertencia