

Floss: ADA has been promoting floss universally since 1908

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Investigation

Last year, the Associated Press asked the departments of Health and Human Services and Agriculture for their evidence, and followed up with written requests under the Freedom of Information Act.

When the federal government issued its latest dietary guidelines this year, the flossing recommendation had been removed, without notice. In a letter to the AP, the government acknowledged the effectiveness of flossing had never been researched, as required.

The AP looked at the most rigorous research conducted over the past decade, focusing on 25 studies that generally compared the use of a toothbrush with the combination of toothbrushes and floss. The findings? The evidence for flossing is “weak, very unreliable,” of “very low” quality, and carries “a moderate to large potential for bias.”

“The majority of available studies fail to demonstrate that flossing is generally effective in plaque removal,” said one review conducted last year. Another 2015 review cites “inconsistent/weak evidence” for flossing and a “lack of efficacy.”

One study in 2011 did credit floss with a slight reduction in gum inflammation — which can sometimes develop over time into full-fledged gum disease. However, the reviewers ranked the evidence as “very unreliable.” A commentary in a dental magazine stated that any benefit would be so minute it might not be noticed by users.

Outdated methods

The two leading professional groups — the American Dental Association and the American Academy of Periodontology, for specialists in gum disease and implants — cited other studies as proof of their claims that flossing prevents buildup of gunk known as plaque, early gum inflammation called gingivitis, and tooth decay. However, most of these studies used outdated methods or tested few people. Some lasted only two weeks, far too brief for a cavity or dental disease to develop. One tested 25 people after only a single use of floss. Such research, like the reviewed studies, focused on warning signs like bleeding and inflammation, barely dealing with gum disease or cavities.

Wayne Aldredge, president of the periodontists’ group, acknowledged the weak scientific evidence and the brief duration of many studies. In an interview at his private practice in New Jersey, he said that the impact of floss might be clearer if researchers focused on patients at the highest risk of gum disease, such as diabetics and smokers.

Still, he urges his patients to floss to help avoid gum disease. “It’s like building a house and not painting two sides of it,” he said. “Ultimately those two sides are going to rot away quicker.”

Aldredge also said many people use floss incorrectly, moving it in a sawing motion instead of up and down the sides of the teeth. Pressed about the origins of his organization’s



AP Photo/Julio Cortez
Dr. Wayne Aldredge, president of the American Academy of Periodontology, holds a piece of dental floss at his office in Holmdel, N.J. Aldredge acknowledges the weak scientific evidence and the brief duration of many studies on flossing, but says that the impact of floss might be clearer if researchers focused on patients at the highest risk of gum disease, such as diabetics and smokers.

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Tim Iafolla
National Institutes of Health dentist

endorsement of flossing, he said it may simply have “taken the ADA’s lead.”

When the ADA was asked for proof of its claim that flossing helps prevent early gum disease and cavities, the group cited the 2011 review and a 2008 two-week study that measured bacteria and did not even consider gum disease.

In a later statement to the AP, the ADA said flossing “removes plaque” and “is proven to help remove” debris from between teeth. A video on its website proclaims that flossing “helps prevent gum disease.” When pressed, Matthew J. Messina, a practicing dentist and spokesman for the dental association, acknowledged weak evidence, but he blamed research participants who didn’t floss correctly.

In the business

Even companies with a big market share of the flossing business — by next year, the global market is predicted to reach almost \$2 billion, with half in the United States, according to publisher Market-SizeInfo.com — struggled to provide convincing evidence of their claims that floss reduces plaque or gingivitis. Yet the industry has paid for most studies and sometimes designed and conducted the research.

Procter & Gamble, which claims that its floss fights plaque and gingivitis, pointed to a two-week study, which was discounted as irrelevant in the 2011 research review.

Johnson & Johnson spokesman Marc Boston said floss helps remove plaque. When the AP sent him a list of contradicting studies, he declined comment.

The floss-making companies partner with the ADA through its Seal of Acceptance program. The ADA pro-

motes the seal to companies as something that “directly affects the purchase decisions of consumers,” each manufacturer is charged \$14,500 for the evaluation. If it approves the product, the ADA then charges an additional annual fee of \$3,500.

The ADA says it rigorously evaluates products and makes no profit from the program. However, floss companies themselves are allowed to design the studies.

“The funding can come from companies — no problem at all,” said dentist Marcelo W.B. Araujo, vice president of the ADA’s Science Institute, who joined the organization after serving as an executive for Johnson & Johnson. “The design can start from the company.”

In the beginning

When flossing first gained acceptance, no proof was required of remedies. Dentist Levi Spear Parmly is credited with inventing floss in the early 19th century. By the time the first floss patent was issued, in 1874, the applicant noted that dentists were widely recommending its use.

The ADA has been promoting floss universally since 1908. “They just looked into what they did every day in their clinical practice and what they would recommend for patients,” said Araujo.

Count dentist Damien Walmsley, scientific adviser to the British Dental Association, among the skeptics. “It’s important to tell people to do the basics. Flossing is not part of the basics.”

Floss can occasionally cause harm. Careless flossing can damage gums, teeth and dental work. Though frequency is unclear, floss can dislodge bad bacteria that invade the bloodstream and cause dangerous infections, especially in people with weak immunity, according to the medical literature.

National Institutes of Health dentist Tim Iafolla acknowledged that if the highest standards of science were applied in keeping with the flossing reviews of the past decade, “then it would be appropriate to drop the floss guidelines.”

Regardless, he added, Americans should still floss.

“It’s low risk, low cost,” he said. “We know there’s a possibility that it works, so we feel comfortable telling people to go ahead and do it.”



Courtesy of Clatsop County Historical Society
The Tourist No. 2 ferried tourists and their cars from Astoria to Megler until the Astoria Bridge opened 50 years ago.

Ferry: ‘It’s great to see the ferry make the trip home’

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Washington, before the Astoria Bridge was built in 1966. The nonprofit Astoria Ferry, which has placed a \$15,000 deposit to buy the ferry from owner Christian Lint, timed the homecoming to take advantage of the nostalgia around the 50th anniversary of the bridge this month.

“So we think it’s a pretty good, brilliant idea,” Taylor told the Astoria City Council Monday night.

Others think the ferry might be better off on land than the Columbia River.

Ron Stidham, of Olney, worked on the Astoria ferries from 1956 to 1966. He recalled that the Tourist No. 2, which has been significantly modified, “always handled the best.”

Though he is happy to reunite with a piece of Astoria maritime history, Stidham is skeptical that the ferry will be used to take passengers on chartered trips or be rented out for private parties.

He suspects that the Coast Guard safety regulations that must be met, and the cost of maintenance involved in keeping the boat on the water, will make the current business plan problematic.

“I hope I’m wrong on that, but it doesn’t seem to me that



Submitted Photo
This photo of the ferry sign at Megler was taken in May 1931.

it would work,” he said.

When he first heard that the Tourist No. 2 might return, he thought that the ferry should be presented as a static attraction in Heritage Square, a way to turn the unlovely pit into a locus of community pride.

“I think that’s where it would do the most good,” Stidham said.

He envisions an area with benches, picnic tables, rose gardens and, at the center, the ferry, which could still be used for parties, weddings and other occasions.

“It would be a draw, and the core area’s crying for

something,” he said.

At Heritage Square, the Tourist No. 2 could be preserved as a reminder of the city’s history, much like the Peacock, the pilot boat outside the Columbia River Maritime Museum.

Dave Pearson, the deputy director at the Maritime Museum, is taking a wait-and-see approach. “It’s great to see the ferry make the trip home,” he said. “Our understanding is this is short term. We will wait to see what they have in mind for a business model.”

Erick Bengel contributed to this report.



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PERS: Board will send employers their new rates in September. Rates will take effect July 1

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PERS resets public employers’ required payments every two years to pay down any deficit and return the fund to a fully funded status over a 20-year period.

At the meeting Friday, an actuary said that even if PERS investments reached their assumed returns of 7.5 percent, contribution rates will have to go up by about 4 percent of payroll in 2017, 2019 and 2021, putting contributions to the system at about \$4.5 billion in 2021 compared with \$2 billion in the current biennium.

John Thomas, a Eugene benefits consultant who chairs the PERS Board, said a spike in returns isn’t going to solve

the problem in the long term.

“It’s a systemic problem,” he said. “Everything is predicated on a linear 7.5 percent investment return, and that has not been sustainable. It’s a whole different paradigm to what we’ve been used to in the past.”

The shortfall leaves school districts facing a \$335 million increase in costs next biennium, which some Republican lawmakers have equated to hiring 2,000 new teachers.

“Unsustainable and escalating PERS costs will not lead to reducing class sizes, adding school days, or making our communities safer,” Senate Republican Leader Ted Ferrioli of John Day said in a news release sent out Friday. “We

need fair and constitutional PERS solutions that reduce costs, ensure the long-term stability of the system to protect retirees, and allow for investments in education.”

State agencies will see their PERS bill increase by \$260 million, and other public employers will have \$290 million in new expenses.

Republican lawmakers have compiled a list of money-saving pension reforms, but Gov. Kate Brown and Democratic lawmakers did not take up any of the proposals in the 2015 legislative session or this year’s short session.

The PERS Board will send employers their new rates in September. The rates will take effect July 1.