

Why Is Oil Pulling Suddenly All the Rage?

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- › Oil pulling, a traditional ayurvedic remedy that's been valued for oral health maintenance since ancient times, is trending online
- › The hashtag #oilpulling has more than 350 million views on TikTok
- › Influencers are sharing videos of the technique and saying it makes their teeth whiter, gums healthier and breath fresher
- › Scientific evidence backs up oil pulling's benefits: Oil pulling with coconut oil had a significant effect on plaque index score and reduced bacteria in saliva compared to controls
- › About half the medium-chain fatty acids that make up coconut oil are lauric acid, which has powerful antimicrobial and anti-inflammatory properties; coconut oil has also been found to fight *Streptococcus mutans*, which is associated with cavities, and *Candida albicans*

Oil pulling, a traditional ayurvedic remedy that's been valued for oral health maintenance since ancient times, is now trending online. The hashtag #oilpulling has more than 350 million views on TikTok,¹ and influencers are sharing videos of the technique and saying it makes their teeth whiter, gums healthier and breath fresher.

It's likely becoming more popular as people seek out natural ways to improve their health and are increasingly realizing the importance of working with their body's natural

systems. Using chemical mouthwash may alter the balance of microbes in your mouth, but oil pulling with coconut oil supports microbial balance.

As TikToker Kayla Ryan put it, “It just makes a nice ecosystem in your mouth.”² You don’t have to take social media’s word for it, however. There’s a wealth of science to back up oil pulling’s oral health benefits.

Benefits of Oil Pulling for Oral Health

A systematic review published in Heliyon states that oil pulling is believed to cure more than 30 systemic diseases while offering the following benefits to oral health:³

Reduced inflammation and bleeding	Improved dry mouth and throat
Relief from chapped lips	Whiter teeth
Reduced bad breath (halitosis)	Improved oral hygiene
Stronger jaw and oral cavity muscles	

The review of 42 studies found oil pulling with coconut oil had a significant effect on plaque index score and reduced bacteria in saliva compared to controls.⁴ Another study involved 60 adolescents with gingivitis, an inflammatory disease caused by an accumulation of plaque, or bacteria, on the teeth that often leads to bleeding gums. If left untreated, it can lead to periodontitis and related teeth loss.

Oil pulling with coconut oil significantly decreased plaque and improved gingivitis by day seven, with improvements continuing over the 30-day study period.⁵ A separate pilot study of 20 people with plaque-induced gingivitis involved the use of coconut oil as a mouthwash daily for 30 days.

A control group carried out normal daily oral health procedures without coconut oil. While plaque and bleeding decreased in both groups, the coconut oil group had a more

significant decline, showing promise for oil pulling to reduce plaque formation and gingivitis.⁶

Another study also added coconut oil pulling to the normal oral hygiene procedures of middle-aged adults with plaque-induced gingivitis. The group that used oil pulling in addition to regular brushing had a significantly greater decline in gingivitis and plaque after six weeks.⁷

The benefits are likely caused not only by the physical act of swishing the oil but also due to the coconut oil itself. A preliminary report published in the Nigerian Medical Journal noted:⁸

“In oil pulling, as the oil is swished in the mouth the mechanical shear forces exerted on the oil leads to its emulsification and the surface area of the oil is greatly increased. The oil film thus formed on the surface of the teeth and the gingiva can reduce plaque adhesion and bacterial co aggregation.

It was also proposed that the alkalis in the saliva can react with the oil leading to saponification and formation of a soap like substance, which can reduce the adhesion of plaque. Coconut oil has a high saponification value and is one of the most commonly used oil in making soaps. The soaps produced with coconut oil can lather well and have an increased cleansing action.

The lauric acid in the coconut oil can easily react with sodium hydroxide in saliva during oil pulling to form sodium laureate, the main constituent of soap, which might be responsible for the cleansing action and decreased plaque accumulation ... The significant reduction in gingivitis can be attributed to decreased plaque accumulation and the anti-inflammatory, emollient effect of coconut oil.”

Why Coconut Oil Is Ideal for Oil Pulling

An orthodontist commented on social media that it's not coconut oil that removes plaque but, rather, the swishing motion of pulling the oil through your teeth. “You can

swish with anything for 20 min and it will remove plaque OR you can just brush your teeth in 2 min [sic] whatever works for you,” he said, as reported by Yahoo News.⁹

But there’s good reason to believe that coconut oil contributes unique benefits to the oil pulling process, making it the ideal oil for the job. About half of the medium-chain fatty acids that make up coconut oil are lauric acid, which has powerful antimicrobial and anti-inflammatory properties. Coconut oil has also been found to fight *Streptococcus mutans*, which is associated with cavities, and *Candida albicans*.¹⁰

Coconut oil’s antifungal properties may be particularly useful for people suffering from oral candidiasis, or oral thrush. Coconut oil may kill yeast in the mouth while also pulling toxins from the oral cavity during swishing, helping to eliminate candida pathogens.¹¹

Chemical Mouthwash Should Be Avoided

Coconut oil is “readily accessible and cheap,”¹² with no reported adverse effects. But despite its safety, effectiveness and accessibility, the American Dental Association (ADA) still does not recommend it:¹³

“Currently, there are no reliable scientific studies to show that oil pulling reduces cavities, whitens teeth or improves oral health and well-being. Based on the lack of scientific evidence, the American Dental Association does not recommend oil pulling as a dental hygiene practice.”

The only downside, if you can call it that, to oil pulling is that it takes up to 20 minutes a day to complete. While rinsing with a chemical mouthwash is faster, that’s its only advantage. Yet, ADA describes it as a “helpful addition to the daily dental hygiene routine for some people.”¹⁴ What they don’t tell you is that chemical mouthwash kills off both good and bad bacteria in your mouth, with potentially detrimental effects.

“In the mouth, you don’t want to have a ‘[scorched earth policy](#),’ nuking all bacteria and hoping the good bugs come back,” Dr. Gerry Curatola, founder of Rejuvenation Dentistry, who has over 30 years’ experience in biological dentistry, said during our 2020 interview.¹⁵ “[G]ood bugs basically have a harder chance of setting up a healthy-balanced

microbiome when you disturb them, or denature them, or dehydrate them with alcohol-based products.”

A natural alternative to mouthwash would be oil pulling with coconut oil, which has a lipophilic effect, helping to eliminate unhealthy biofilm from your teeth. While it does have a natural detergent effect, it doesn't do the damage chemical detergents do.

Twice-daily use of mouthwash has been linked to an increased risk of prediabetes and Type 2 diabetes, by affecting oral bacteria critical for the formation of nitric oxide, which predisposes individuals to metabolic disorders like diabetes.¹⁶

Most mouthwashes contain antiseptics like chlorhexidine, which has been used in dental practice since 1970 and has broad-spectrum antibacterial activity.¹⁷ The antiseptic has been found to reduce bacteria associated with periodontal disease and dental caries, as well as reducing bad breath,¹⁸ but not without a cost.

Bacteria in your mouth are thought to play a role in blood pressure via nitric oxide (NO), a soluble gas stored in the lining of your blood vessels, called the endothelium. NO is produced inside your endothelial cells from the amino acid L-arginine, where it acts as an important signaling molecule throughout your body.

Disrupting your oral microbiome with chemical mouthwash, in turn, may raise blood pressure levels. In one study, the use of mouthwash twice daily was associated with a significant increase in systolic blood pressure after one week. Once the mouthwash was stopped, “recovery from use resulted in an enrichment in nitrate-reducing bacteria on the tongue.”¹⁹

Differences in more than 10 species of bacteria living on the tongue were noted after mouthwash use, including lower microbial diversity after one week of use.²⁰ Mouthwash use may also stain your teeth, in contrast to coconut oil, which may leave your teeth whiter. In a study that compared coconut oil pulling with use of a chlorhexidine mouthwash, the mouthwash led to more tooth staining after four days.²¹

Want to Give Oil Pulling a Try? It's Simple

Oil pulling is one social media trend that you can get behind for better health. Part of its allure is its simplicity. You don't need a doctor's prescription or a trip to the dentist, just a small amount of coconut oil – 1 tablespoon for adults and 1 teaspoon for a child. If you've never tried oil pulling before, start slowly with one or two minutes a day, gradually working your way up to 20 minutes:²²

"In the oil pulling procedure, the oil has to be kept in the mouth for the duration of 20 minutes, preferably in the morning before breakfast. The quantity for adults is equal to a tablespoon, for children to a teaspoon.

The oil, during the rinsing, has to be pulled and forced in between all the teeth and brought to contact to all the parts of the mouth. At the end of this procedure, if it has been performed properly, the aspect of the oil should be thin, viscous, and milky. Afterward, it has to be spat out and the mouth has to be rinsed with warm water."

You should spit the used oil directly into a garbage can or outdoors, not down your sink or in the toilet, which could cause clogs. Although your saliva is combined with the oil, the liquid may still be oily enough to coat your plumbing and cause a blockage or cause water to drain more slowly. Avoid swallowing the oil, as it contains bacteria and other toxins pulled from your mouth.

It's easy to add oil pulling to your daily routine, prior to brushing your teeth in the morning. For an added boost, by increasing the pH in your mouth after pulling you may reduce bacterial growth even further. To do that, mix 1 teaspoon of baking soda in 6 ounces of water and gargle. This will alkalize the pH of your mouth, and since bacteria thrive in an acidic environment, the increased pH will discourage growth.

Sources and References

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