

Oral Health Tips



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Sugar Isn't the Only Culprit When it Comes to Tooth Decay

The Halloween ghosts and goblins are gone. For most of us that means extra candy and sugary treats around the house, school and office. However satisfying they might be, sweet snacks aren't without some dangers to teeth. And it might be surprising to know that sugar isn't the only cause of tooth decay.

Tooth decay is an infection

Despite impressive advances in technology and education, tooth decay is still a leading infectious, transmissible disease among children. The process of tooth decay requires three primary factors: bacteria in dental plaque (the primary oral bacteria is called streptococcus mutans), sugar and a vulnerable tooth surface. After eating and drinking foods or beverages containing sugar (carbohydrates), bacteria convert the sugar left on the tooth surface into acids. These acids damage tooth enamel over time by dissolving (or demineralizing) the mineral structure of teeth, producing tooth decay and weakening the teeth. If left undisturbed, damaged tooth structure continues to grow, creating holes in the teeth or further tooth decay.

Tooth decay can cause pain and lead to infections in surrounding tissues and tooth loss if not treated properly. Signs of tooth decay include white spots, tooth discolorations, holes in the teeth and sensitivity to temperatures. The daily reality for children with untreated tooth decay is often persistent pain, inability to eat comfortably or chew well, embarrassing discolored and damaged teeth and distraction from play and learning. Adults can suffer the same consequences.

Tooth decay is contagious

Tooth decay can spread from parents and caregivers to babies. Although babies are not born with decay-causing bacteria in their mouths, many unsuspecting parents (especially mothers) and caregivers pass these bacteria to their children by saliva transmission. The higher the levels of decay-causing bacteria in the parent's or caregiver's mouth, the more likely the child will become infected. Research has shown that children have a reduced risk of developing tooth decay if their mothers have had good oral health.

Bacteria can spread easily through common behaviors such as:

- Kissing with a saliva transfer
- Sharing cups, water bottles and toothbrushes
- Sharing utensils
- Pre-chewing a baby's food
- "Cleaning" baby's pacifier by putting it in the parent's mouth
- Testing the temperature of a baby's bottle by mouth
- Allowing a baby to put hands into parent's or caregiver's mouth and then into her own mouth

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Sugar Isn't the Only Culprit

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Babies and primary teeth

Primary (baby) teeth are susceptible to decay as soon as they appear, so special care should be taken to keep them healthy. Extensive tooth decay that occurs in infants is usually called baby bottle tooth decay (early childhood caries). This occurs when baby teeth are frequently exposed to liquids containing sugar, such as milk, formula, fruit juice, sodas and other sweetened drinks. When children are allowed to drink sugary liquids from a bottle or sippy cup, the sugars can pool around the teeth and gums and feed the bacteria that cause decay.

It's not just white sugar

Candy and sugary foods are not the only culprits causing tooth decay. Many foods, including healthy foods, contain complex carbohydrates that metabolize into sugars. Examples include pizza; bread products, including hamburger and hotdog buns; some fresh fruits; and many snack foods. These foods can have the same result as foods with high sugar content. In addition, brown sugar, honey, molasses and syrups also react with bacteria in the mouth to produce acids.

Healthy snacks

It's not realistic to completely eliminate snacks from your diet. In fact, snacks can offer important vitamins and minerals. Healthy meals and snacks should include a variety of foods from the basic food groups, such as fruits and vegetables, whole grains, milk and dairy products, meat, nuts and seeds.

Tooth decay can be prevented

When sugar and starches are left on the teeth for 20 minutes or more, they fuel bacteria and can attack teeth. Properly cleaning teeth and choosing healthy foods can prevent tooth decay, gum disease and possible tooth loss. There are things you can do to minimize the risk of dental disease.

Tips for Healthy Teeth

- Encourage children to make good food choices and to eat regular, healthy and balanced meals. Encourage children to have a healthy dinner or snack before they go to a holiday or birthday party.
- Choose sugary foods less often. When you do consume sweets, try to do so during meals. Saliva production increases during meals and helps neutralize acid production and rinse food particles from the mouth. The American Dental Association (ADA) has indicated that stickier foods like raisins and gummy bears are more likely to be retained on teeth and less likely to be washed out from all surfaces on the teeth by saliva.
- Drink tap water instead of sugary drinks. Water does an excellent job of rinsing the teeth, diluting the acids, and when fluoridated, can actually promote the growth and development of stronger teeth. Bottled water usually does not contain sufficient fluoride. Limit drinks that contain sugar, such as soda, juice or sports drinks.

- Choose nutritious snacks, such as fresh fruits and raw vegetables, whole grains, dairy products, meat and nuts. Consider chewing sugarless gum, which promotes saliva production.
- Parents and caregivers should be sure that children's teeth are brushed twice per day, especially before bedtime. ADA accepted dental products are recommended.
- Limit hard candies, which are high in sugar and stay in the mouth for a long time. They can also chip or crack teeth or cause children to choke.
- Floss daily or use another kind of interdental cleaner to remove plaque between teeth.
- Visit the dentist for regular checkups. The frequency of dental visits should be based upon your individual needs and discussed with your dentist.
- Establish a daily oral health care routine, which includes brushing and flossing, and eating a nutritious diet.

Parents and caregivers can help minimize the ghoulish effects that Halloween, holiday and birthday treats can have on children's teeth, while still allowing them to enjoy the spirit of the event! Remember, tooth decay can be prevented by selecting healthy foods and brushing and flossing every day.