

Oral Health Tips

Tackling Teen Dental Health: A Message for Parents

Music, fashion and friends are the staples of a teen lifestyle. Ask a teenager what a healthy mouth is and they are likely to say — one with fresh breath and a big smile. The decision to brush and floss teeth may seem trivial to a teenager, but this decision may have a lasting effect not only to their oral health, but also their overall health. The incidence of oral health problems among teens ages 12-19 remains a concern. Take time to re-educate, re-emphasize and renew your teenager's commitment to a healthy smile by reminding your teenager about making good choices that will protect their smile for a lifetime.

Healthy Habits for Teens

Dental decay may be more of a problem for your child during their teen years than ever before. A busy teen schedule means more quick meals including fast food restaurants and protein bars. Many of these foods contain sugars and starches that form a sticky film that will house bacteria that can cause cavities. If not removed, this sticky film can cause plaque build-up that may lead to dental disease. The stickiness of the plaque keeps acids in contact with teeth and after repeated contact, the enamel can break down in conjunction with bacteria and form a cavity.

Oral Piercings

Teens are not always aware of the potential problems that mouth piercings, which include tongue and lip, can cause until it's too late. Two side effects that can occur are infections and accidental tooth fractures. Infections can cause pain and swelling, but can also cause the tongue to swell and block the airway causing more serious effects. Tooth fractures or chipped teeth may affect the enamel of the tooth, requiring a filling or crown, a root canal or even having the tooth pulled.

Mouthguards and Seat Belts

Mouthguards can be an important piece of protective gear and an easy way to protect your teen's smile from serious

injury. Teens are advised to wear a mouthguard while playing any contact sports that may involve the mouth being hit. Teens with orthodontia should check with their dentist or orthodontist to see if they recommend a mouthguard. It is important for teens to wear a seat belt whether it is just to and from activities or when your teen is learning to drive. A seat belt, including the shoulder strap, can prevent the face and mouth from hitting the dashboard or steering wheel if your teen is involved in a traffic accident.

Soda and Sugary Beverages

Soda may be one of the biggest teenage oral health challenges. Teens are drinking over 50% more soda than they did 20 years ago. Recent reports indicate that the average 12-19 year old male drinks the equivalent of two cans of soda per day. With a typical 12-ounce can of soda containing approximately 10 teaspoons of sugar, that means over 90 pounds of sugar each year just from soda. Sugar is not the only problem with drinking soda and sugary beverages. The acid from added flavors may also erode and damage tooth enamel, which may lead to decay.

[continued on next page](#)

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[continued from previous page](#)

There are simple ways for teens to limit the harmful effects of soda:

- Offer water instead of soft drinks or sugary liquids. This prevents dehydration and cleans excess bacteria in the mouth.
- Keep the contact time of soda and sugary beverages to a minimum. Avoid sipping over an extended period of time. Use a straw positioned toward the back of the mouth.
- Chew sugar-free gum to stimulate saliva flow or rinse your mouth with water for 30 seconds to dilute sugar and acids.
- Drink fluoridated water and brush with a fluoridated toothpaste to help remineralize the teeth.
- Brush and floss twice a day.

Tobacco

The effects of tobacco on a teen's overall health should not be minimized. Besides bad breath and stains to teeth and gums, cigarettes, cigars or smokeless tobacco may cause damage to gum tissue causing inflammation and periodontal disease (gum disease). Tobacco can also lead to tooth decay by affecting how the bone attaches to the soft tissue of teeth. Tobacco products can cause oral cancer. The early signs of cancer often go unnoticed because there is little discomfort. If oral cancer is not caught early, it can require painful and disfiguring surgery or could result in death. Remind your teens that if they choose to use tobacco products, to see their dentist if they experience changes in their oral health that include sores that don't heal or red or white patches on their lips or tongue.

Teen Tips

1. Establishing or re-establishing a regular (twice a day) dental health program that includes brushing with fluoridated toothpaste and flossing. Encourage them to brush their teeth to one of their favorite songs in its entirety.
2. Keep up with regular dental visits. Cleanings, fluoride treatments and sealants are important prevention efforts. Regular dental visits can also help identify dental problems early.
3. Choose a healthy and balanced diet that includes vegetables and fruits.
4. Choose nutritious snacks that contain less sugar and sticky substances. Also avoid letting snacks take the place of regular and balanced nutritional meals.
5. Drink fluoridated water to help cleanse the teeth of excess bacteria and food debris.
6. Check with the dentist before starting or using a teeth whitening product. Emphasis should be on dental health habits and their vital role in a healthy smile.
7. It is recommended that teens not smoke, chew tobacco or pierce their tongue or lips.
8. Wear protective gear like mouthguards during sports and be sure to wear a seat belt.
9. Parents should be good role models by practicing good oral health care habits.
10. For teens on the go, keep a travel-sized toothbrush in their locker or backpack, or carry sugar-free gum that contains xylitol or drink water to ward off the effects of snacks and in-between meals.

Eating Disorders

Eating disorders like bulimia and anorexia can lead to inflammation of the gums, erosion of tooth enamel, cavities and can eventually cause tooth loss. Eating disorders such as bulimia that involve vomiting may result in tooth erosion. Erosion is the loss of tooth enamel (the hard, protective coating of the tooth) and when the enamel is worn away, the dentin is exposed and may lead to pain, sensitivity and an increased chance of decay.

Teeth Whitening

Healthy teeth are not always white. Teens who wish to whiten their teeth should wait until after age 14 and should always discuss the best method with their dentist. If the teen wears orthodontic appliances (braces), they should wait until they are removed.

A healthy smile includes not only fresh breath, but also strong teeth. Both factors contribute to a teen's confidence and self-esteem. Teens are making many choices that affect their oral health, so this is a great time to re-emphasize the importance of good oral health habits to their overall health and appearance. Teens need to find new ways to implement oral health habits that are easy and they should be encouraged to take responsibility for their dental health. By implementing a few key habits, your teen's oral health will become something you and your teenager can smile about.

Sources: Centers for Disease Control; American Academy of Pediatrics; American Dental Association; Academy of General Dentistry