

Tooth Decay

Overview

Although tooth decay has declined among young children as a group, it can still be a problem for individual children, and even teens and adults. That's because plaque, a sticky film of bacteria, constantly forms on your teeth. When you eat or drink foods containing sugars or starches, the bacteria in plaque produce acids that attack tooth enamel. The stickiness of the plaque keeps these acids in contact with your teeth and after many such attacks, the enamel can break down and a cavity forms.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is Tooth Decay?

Tooth decay is a destruction of the tooth enamel. It occurs when foods containing carbohydrates (sugars and starches) such as milk, pop, raisins, cakes or candy are frequently left on the teeth. Bacteria that live in the mouth thrive on these foods, producing acids as a result. Over a period of time, these acids destroy tooth enamel, resulting in tooth decay.

How Do I Prevent Tooth Decay?

You can help prevent tooth decay by following these tips:

- Brush twice a day with a fluoride toothpaste.
- Clean between your teeth daily with floss or interdental cleaner.
- Eat nutritious and balanced meals and limit snacking.
- Check with your dentist about use of supplemental fluoride, which strengthens your teeth, and about use of dental sealants (a plastic protective coating) applied to the chewing surfaces of the back teeth (where decay often starts) to protect them from decay.
- Visit your dentist regularly for professional cleanings and oral examination.

Aren't Cavities Just Kid's Stuff?

No. Changes that occur with aging make cavities an adult problem, too. Recession of the gums away from the teeth, combined with an increased incidence of periodontal (gum) disease, can expose tooth roots to plaque. Tooth roots are covered with cementum, a softer tissue than enamel. They are susceptible to decay and are more sensitive to touch and to hot and cold. The majority of people over age 50 have tooth-root decay.

Decay around the edges, or margins, of fillings is also common to older adults. Because many older adults lacked benefits of fluoride and modern preventive dental care when they were growing up, they often have a number of dental fillings. Over the years, these fillings may weaken and tend to fracture and leak around the edges. Bacteria accumulate in these tiny crevices causing acid to build up which leads to decay.

