

Diet and Oral Health

Overview

Your body is like a complex machine. The foods you choose as fuel and how often you “fill up” affect your general health and that of your teeth and gums. Many dentists are concerned that their patients are consuming record numbers of sugar-filled sodas, sweetened fruit drinks, and non-nutritious snacks that affect their teeth. These items generally have little if any nutritional value and over time they can take a toll on teeth.

Eating patterns and food choices among children and teens are important factors that affect how quickly youngsters may develop tooth decay. When bacteria (plaque) come into contact with sugar in the mouth, acid is produced, which attacks the teeth for 20 minutes or more. This can eventually result in tooth decay.

Not sure you're getting the nutrients, vitamins and minerals needed by your body (and your teeth and gums)? Check out the [U.S. Department of Agriculture's Web site](#). The USDA oversees the nutritional health of the nation. The agency's dietary recommendations are designed to promote optimal health and to prevent obesity-related diseases including cardiovascular disease, Type 2 diabetes and cancers.

The government's recommendations recognize that people have different dietary needs at various stages of life. They offer guidance for children and adults based on their levels of physical activity. Your physician or a registered dietician can also provide suggestions for your daily food intake.

Foods that contain sugars of any kind can contribute to tooth decay. Almost all foods, including milk or vegetables, have some type of sugar. However, they shouldn't be removed from our diets because many of them contain important nutrients. And they add pleasure to eating. To help control the amount of sugar you consume, read food labels and choose foods and beverages that are low in added sugars. Added sugars often are present in soft drinks, candy, cookies and pastries.

If your diet lacks certain nutrients, it may be more difficult for tissues in your mouth to resist infection. This may contribute to periodontal (gum) disease, a major cause of tooth loss in adults. Although poor nutrition does not cause periodontal disease directly, many researchers believe that the disease progresses faster and could be more severe in people with nutrient-poor diets

What can you do?

- Maintain a healthy diet.
- Make sure water is readily available.
- Limit the number of between-meal snacks. When you must snack, choose nutritious foods that are low in sugar.
- Brush thoroughly twice a day with a fluoride toothpaste that has the American Dental Association's Seal of Acceptance.

- Floss or use another kind of interdental cleaner daily to remove plaque (a thin film of bacteria) from under the gums and between teeth.
- Schedule regular dental visits for checkups and cleanings.
- Keep a food diary for a week. Record every item you eat and drink, including hard candies or chewing gum that contains sugar. Compare the diary to the food Pyramid recommendations.

Frequently Asked Questions

- **How does the food you eat cause tooth decay?**
 - When you eat, food passes through your mouth. Here it meets the germs, or bacteria, that live in your mouth. You may have heard your dentist talk about plaque. Plaque is a sticky film of bacteria.
 - These bacteria love sugars found in many foods. When you don't clean your teeth after eating, plaque bacteria use the sugar to produce acids that can destroy the hard surface of the tooth, called enamel. After a while, tooth decay occurs. The more often you eat and the longer foods are in your mouth, the more damage occurs.
- **How do I choose foods wisely?**
 - Some foods that you would least expect contain sugars. Some examples are fruits, milk, bread, cereals and even vegetables.
 - The key to choosing foods wisely is not to avoid these foods, but to think before you eat. Not only what you eat but when you eat makes a big difference in your dental health. Eat a balanced diet and limit between-meal snacks. If you are on a special diet, keep your physician's advice in mind when choosing foods. For good dental health, keep these tips in mind when choosing your meals and snacks.
- **What are tips for better dental health?**
 - To get a balanced diet, eat a variety of foods. Choose foods from each of the five major food groups:
 - breads, cereals and other grain products
 - fruits
 - vegetables
 - meat, poultry and fish
 - milk, cheese and yogurt
 - Limit the number of snacks that you eat. Each time you eat food that contains sugars, the teeth are attacked by acids for 20 minutes or more.

- If you do snack, choose nutritious foods, such as cheese, raw vegetables, plain yogurt, or a piece of fruit.
 - Foods that are eaten as part of a meal cause less harm. More saliva is released during a meal, which helps wash foods from the mouth and helps lessen the effects of acids.
 - Brush twice a day with a fluoride toothpaste that has the American Dental Association Seal of Acceptance.
 - Clean between your teeth daily with floss or interdental cleaners.
 - Visit your dentist regularly. Your dentist can help prevent problems from occurring and catch those that do occur while they are easy to treat.
- **Does the ADA oppose soft drinks?**
 - The ADA opposes contractual arrangements in schools that promote increased access to soft drinks for children, thereby influencing consumption patterns. These contractual arrangements are sometimes known as "pouring rights contracts" and "exclusive soft drink contracts."
- **What's the concern with selling soft drinks in schools via pouring rights arrangements?**
 - To the best of the Association's knowledge, pouring rights contracts inevitably include the promotion of sugar containing products as well as other non-nutritious soft drink products. In addition to a singular brand endorsement, it has been widely reported that these arrangements oblige schools to allow pervasive marketing to children and include minimum sales incentives that can influence children's consumption patterns.
- **Why is this coming up now?**
 - Dentists are aware of reports that since 1998 over 300 school districts in 32 states have entered into pouring rights contracts, some contracts lasting 10 years - longer than the term of most school board members. The Association has for many years opposed targeting children in the promotion and advertisement of foods low in nutritional value and high in cariogenic carbohydrates. Also, the Association encourages its state and local dental societies to work with school officials to ensure that school food services, including vending services and school stores, provide nutritious food selections.
- **What is a soft drink?**
- The Association's policy says soft drinks include beverages containing sugars and/or carbonation, and/or acidic products. These could include soda pop, juice drinks, sports (electrolyte replacement) drinks with added sugars and other beverages with added sugars.
- **Do soft drinks cause decay?**

- There are many factors that affect whether decay forms. What we do know is that when teeth come in frequent contact with soft drinks and other sugar-containing substances, the risk of decay formation is increased. The Association seeks to educate the public about ways to decrease disease risk.
- **What can kids drink?**
 - Choose beverages that hydrate and contribute to good nutrition. Drinking 8-12 cups of water a day is important and consuming optimally fluoridated water can help prevent tooth decay. A resource list of nutritious foods and beverages that could be sold in schools was developed by the California Center for Public Health Advocacy and may be found by clicking [here](#). The California Center for Public Health Advocacy resource list recommends beverages that may be sold in schools including, beverages that contain at least 50% fruit juice with no added sweeteners, water, low fat milk and non-fat milk. This resource list was used to develop part of the 2001 California law, which establishes nutritional requirements for foods and beverages sold and served to children during breaks and through vending machines.