

Diet and Decay

Do you feel empty-handed without a sweetened soft drink to sip on throughout the day?

Do you frequently nibble on chips or other munchies?

Are you in the habit of popping a hard candy into your mouth several times a day?

Do you often skip regular meals and bolster your energy with a few snacks instead?

Some eating habits can wreak havoc on your body and your teeth! Here's why

Fuel for Thought

Your body is a complex machine that needs daily attention if you want it to run well. The foods you choose as fuel and how often you “fill up” can affect the health of your entire body. Without a balanced diet, your body cannot function efficiently, and health problems including obesity, nutrient deficiencies, and even dental caries (cavities) can result.

What you eat and how often you eat can affect your teeth. 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 our teeth. When we eat foods or drink beverages that contain sugar or starch, the bacteria produce acids that attack tooth enamel. The stickiness of plaque keeps the harmful acids against the teeth, which can contribute to tooth decay. Other factors that promote tooth decay are the amount of bacteria in your mouth and lack of exposure to fluoride.

Snacking throughout the day can increase the risk of tooth decay because it increases the rate of harmful acid attacks on tooth enamel. Repeated attacks may cause the enamel to break down, resulting in cavities. If you frequently consume sweetened soft drinks and other foods containing sugars and starches and don't clean your teeth, the result may be tooth decay, gum disease and eventual tooth loss. The length of time food remains in the mouth also plays a role in tooth decay. Hard candy, breath mints and cough drops stay in the mouth for a long period. Unless they are sugar-free products, the teeth are subjected to acid attacks while the product remains in the mouth and for a considerable time after they have been consumed.

Protecting Your Smile

For good general and oral health, **eat nutritious, well-balanced meals** made up of foods from the five major food groups: breads, cereals and other grains; fruits; vegetables; meat, fish, poultry and protein alternates; milk, yogurt and cheese.

Almost all foods have some type of sugar and cannot be eliminated from our diets because many of them contain important nutrients and add enjoyment to eating. One way to deal with this problem is **to eat most sugary foods with meals**. Saliva production increases during a meal and helps to neutralize acid production and rinse food particles from the mouth.

Limit between-meals snacks when possible. If you need a snack, choose nutritious foods, and chew sugarless gum afterward. Sugarless gum increases saliva flow and helps wash out food and decay-producing acid.

To remove plaque, **brush your teeth twice daily with fluoride toothpaste**, which provides some of the daily fluoride needed to prevent tooth decay from forming. Use floss or an interdental cleaner daily to clean between your teeth, areas your toothbrush can't reach. Choose products that carry the ADA Seal of Acceptance, your assurance that the products have met the ADA's standards of safety and effectiveness.

Visit your dentist regularly for oral exams and professional teeth cleanings.