

Nutrition for Healthy Teeth

BY SKYLAR GRIGGS

At least 4 million preschoolers suffer from tooth decay, which is an increase of more than 600,000 kids in the last decade. We know that twice daily brushing is essential for a healthy mouth and preventing cavities. Although, did you know that what you and your family eat can make dental health better or worse? Nutrition affects teeth in variety of ways from overall health and development to preventing periodontal infections.

It's fairly simple, if children have poor diets, their teeth may not develop properly. Children need protein, vitamins and minerals, specifically calcium and phosphorous, to build strong teeth and protect against tooth decay and gum disease.

Upon eating, bacteria naturally present in the mouth changes food into acids to be digested. A combination of bacteria, acid, food pieces, and saliva in the mouth combine to form a sticky substance called plaque. Plaque adheres to the teeth and if unmoved turns into tartar. Tartar irritates the gums and can cause infection and worsen tooth decay. Acids in plaque damage the enamel which covers the tooth, and create holes in the tooth called cavities.

Dietary habits can make dental health better or worse. Excessive starches and sugars increase the risk of tooth decay as they create more bacteria formation in the mouth. Starchy carbohydrates, including potato chips and white breads not only increase the risk of heart disease as compared to their whole grain counterparts, they also easily get trapped in the teeth, feeding the bacteria that created plaque. Aim for whole grain carbohydrates whenever possible, including brown rice, quinoa, wheat, or oat breads. Dried fruit increases an individual's risk of cavities more than fresh fruit. Fresh fruits promote saliva formation, although unlike dried fruit, chewing fresh fruits discourages acid from sticking to the teeth. Furthermore, saliva produced from additional chewing, acts as a natural buffer to acid on the teeth. It's important to remember that dried fruit should not be nixed from the diet. Try to choose fresh fruit over dried, and be sure to always brush well after consumption. Sugary drinks including soda, lemonade and juices are not only bad for your waistline but also your teeth. Worse is sipping sugary drinks for long periods of time, as the teeth are repeatedly bathed with acid. Decrease your child's risk of cavities but not filling up their sippy cups with anything but water. Candy, lollipops, mints,

taffy, caramel, and other chewy, sticky treats are best if eaten as part of a meal rather than a snack. Avoid frequent sucking on candy items, as this increases the teeth exposure to acid. Cookies, cakes, and muffins not only offer no nutritional value but the sugar they contain adheres to the teeth and increases bacteria in the mouth releasing acids leading to tooth decay. Citrus and acidic foods including tomatoes and oranges are nutrition powerhouses. Unfortunately citrus foods also promote tooth decay, especially when eaten by themselves. Don't exclude these foods from your child's diet but rather eat them as part of a meal not alone, and flush mouth with water after consuming them in an effort to buffer the acid.



According to the 2010 Dietary Guideline for Americans:

Top Sources of Added Sugar in the Diet and Percentages

- soft drinks, energy drinks, sports drinks, 35.7%
- grain-based desserts (cakes, pies) 12.9%
- fruit drinks 10.5%
- dairy-based desserts (ice cream) 6.5%
- candy 6.1%
- ready-to-eat cereals 3.8%
- sugars and honey 3.5%
- tea (sweetened) 3.5%
- yeast breads 2.1%
- all other foods 15.4%

High calcium foods such as cheese, milk, plain yogurt, calcium fortified tofu, leafy greens, and almonds may benefit the teeth. Additionally, protein rich foods such as fish, eggs, poultry, and meat are good sources of phosphorus which plays a role in dental health by protecting

and rebuilding the tooth's enamel. Fruits and veggies not only help your heart, but they are also good for your teeth. The high water and fiber content of many fruits and veggies help to clean the teeth and stimulate saliva production which washes away harmful acids and food particles and neutralizes acids in the mouth. Many fruit and veggies contain Vitamin C which is essential for healthy gums and wound healing as well as Vitamin A which aids in building tooth enamel.

Skylar's Bottom Line: *Brush regularly and as directed by your pediatric dentist. Keep added sugar in your child's diet to a minimum by making wise food and beverage choices. As part of an overall heart healthy diet include dairy, plenty of fruits and vegetables, whole grains, nuts, and water in your family's diet.*

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