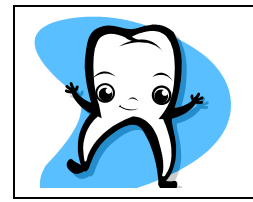


What You Need to Know About TOOTH DECAY



How Tooth Decay Happens

Tooth decay is caused by certain types of bacteria (bugs) that live in your mouth. When they stick to the film on your teeth called dental plaque, they can do damage. The bacteria feed on what you eat, especially sugars (including fruit sugars) and cooked starch (bread, potatoes, rice, pasta, etc.). Within about 5 minutes after you eat or drink, the bacteria begin making acids as they digest your food. Those acids can break into the outer surface of the tooth and melt away some of the minerals. Your saliva can balance the acid attacks if they don't happen very often. However, if: 1) Your mouth is dry, 2) you have a lot of these bacteria, or 3) you snack frequently: then acid causes loss of tooth minerals. This is the start of tooth decay and leads to cavities.

Methods of Controlling Tooth Decay

- **Diet:** Reducing the number of sugary and starchy foods, snacks, or drinks can help reduce tooth decay. That does not mean you can never eat these types of foods. You should simply limit the times you eat these foods between main meals. A good rule is 3 meals per day and no more than 3 snacks per day.
- **Fluorides:** Fluorides help to make teeth stronger and to protect against tooth decay, and to heal tooth decay if it has not gone too far. Fluorides are available from a variety of sources such as drinking water, toothpaste, and rinses you can buy in the supermarket or drug store. They may also be prescribed by your dentist or applied in the dental office. Daily use of fluoride is very important to help protect teeth against the acid attacks.
- **Plaque removal:** Plaque is a yellowish film that sticks to the surface of teeth. Tooth brushing removes plaque and should be done every day. Bacteria live in plaque, so removing the plaque from your teeth on a daily basis helps to control tooth decay. Plaque is very sticky and may be hard to remove from between the teeth and in grooves on the biting surfaces of back teeth. If your child has an orthodontic retainer be sure to remove it before brushing your child's teeth. Brush all surfaces of the retainer also.
- **Saliva:** Saliva is important for healthy teeth. It balances acids and provides other ingredients that protect the teeth. If you cannot brush after a meal or snack, you can chew sugar-free gum. This will stimulate the flow of saliva to help reduce the effect of acids. Sugar-free candy or mints can also be used, but some of these contain acids themselves. Acids in sugar-free candy will not cause tooth decay, but can slowly dissolve the tooth surface over time (a process called erosion). Some sugar-free gums are made to help fight tooth decay. They contain baking soda that neutralizes the acids produced by the bacteria in plaque. **Gum that contains Xylitol as its first ingredient is the gum of choice.** This type of gum has been shown to protect against tooth decay and to reduce the decay causing bacteria.
- **Antibacterial mouth rinses:** Rinses that your dentist can prescribe are able to reduce the numbers of bacteria that cause tooth decay and can be useful in patients at high risk for tooth decay. These rinses are only recommended for children who can rinse and spit.
- **Sealants:** Sealants are plastic coatings brushed onto the biting surfaces of back teeth to protect the deep grooves from decay. In some people, the grooves on the surfaces of the teeth are too narrow and deep to clean with a toothbrush. Teeth may develop decay even if you brush them regularly. Sealants are an excellent preventive measure used for children and young adults at risk for this type of decay.

Questions??? Please contact Smile Keepers program coordinator, Erika Hagstrom-Dossi at
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