

Children's oral health

What foods cause tooth decay in children?

Many different types of food can cause tooth decay, not just candy. Foods that are high in carbohydrates, as well as some fruits, liquids, peanut butter, crackers and potato chips are culprits. Factors that cause tooth decay include the frequency in which the foods are eaten and the time they remain as particles in the mouth.

Can decay affect infants?

Yes. Tooth decay in infants and young children most often occurs in the upper front teeth, but also may affect other teeth. Sometimes parents do not realize that a baby's teeth can decay soon after they first appear. The decay may even enter the underlying bone structure, which can hamper development of the permanent teeth. This problem is frequently referred to as baby bottle tooth decay. This kind of decay is caused by long-term exposure of a child's teeth to liquids containing sugars. When a child consumes a sugary liquid, acid attacks the teeth and gums and causes decay.

Are children safe from soda and other beverages?

Dentists believe that kids who consume too much soda and not enough nutritional beverages are prone to tooth decay in addition to serious ailments later in life, such as diabetes and osteoporosis. Drinking carbonated soft drinks regularly can contribute to the erosion of tooth enamel. Soft drinks contain sticky sugars that bacteria in our mouths use as an energy source. They break down into acids and adhere to tooth surfaces.

How does bacteria hurt teeth?

Decay is caused by bacteria that feed on any food that contains sugars and carbohydrates. Decay occurs when solid or liquid food particles are left unswallowed and cling to the teeth or gums for long periods. Bacteria in the mouth use sugars to produce acid that attacks the enamel of the teeth, softening and then eroding them. Enamel breakdown leads to cavities. If erosion spreads beneath the enamel, pain and sensitivity may eventually result. This can cause nerve infection, which can result in the need for a root canal.

My children rarely drink soda. Are they still at risk for tooth decay?

Yes, any prolonged exposure to soda can cause damage. Sipping a soft drink all afternoon is more harmful to your teeth than drinking a large soda with a meal and then not drinking any soda for the rest of the day. While many dentists advocate drinking nutritional beverages, such as milk, many agree soda should be consumed from a can rather than a bottle with a replaceable cap to discourage prolonged exposure to soda.

How can children prevent damage to their teeth?

Children at school should rinse their mouth with water after meals, leaving their teeth free of sugar and acid.

Children also should seek sources of fluoridation. If you purchase bottled water, be sure that it is fluoridated.

Encourage children to drink tap or fountain water. Use a straw when drinking soda to keep sugar away from teeth. Remember, bottled juices are not a good alternative due to the high sugar content.

Regular dental check-ups, combined with brushing with

fluoride toothpaste also will help protect children's teeth.

How can you help your child prevent tooth decay?

Parents should take their infant to the dentist just after the first tooth appears. Brushing teeth after meals, regular flossing and fluoride treatments are the best ways to prevent tooth decay. Children should also be supervised as they brush. A good rule of thumb is that when children can dress themselves and tie their own shoes, then they are ready to brush unsupervised. Children should be supervised in proper flossing techniques until the age of 10.

If you have any concerns about your child's dental health or want some tips on preventing tooth decay, ask your dentist.