

Oral Health Tips

Smart Snacking Treats Can Be Treacherous

Most of us are confronted every day with numerous opportunities to indulge in an endless variety of candy and sweet snacks. Whether it's the last morsel of chocolate cake in the office breakroom, candy filled office vending machines, desktop candy jars, or a frosted cake at a child's birthday party, the choice to indulge or not indulge is an ongoing reality. However satisfying they might be, sweet snacks aren't without some dangers to your teeth. And, it might be surprising to know that candy and sweet snacks aren't the only culprit. Often there are hidden sugars in many snacks.

What You Can't See Can Hurt You!

Snacks almost always include sugars and starches. The bacteria which cause tooth decay are constantly at work, creating a sticky film on the surface of the teeth and the gums. Sugar (which comes in many forms) and starch act as fuel for these bacteria, leading to the formation of acid that can aggressively attack tooth surfaces. Starchy snacks can also break down into sugars once they are in your mouth. With each acid attack, tooth enamel is broken down and the tooth surface can be weakened, which can result in tooth decay.

One of the important functions of saliva is that it helps to wash the tooth surface and to clear bacteria. Bacteria are persistent, however, and extensive and prolonged snacking can result in saliva's protective abilities being overwhelmed by microbes. The American Dental Association has indicated that the stickier things are, like fruit cake and gummy bears, the less likely they'll be washed out from between the teeth by saliva. Any kind of candy that sticks to your teeth is more harmful than a chocolate bar that gets washed away. Properly cleaning your teeth can prevent tooth decay, gum disease, and possible tooth loss.

The daily reality for children with untreated oral disease is often persistent pain, inability to eat comfortably or chew well, embarrassing discolored and damaged teeth, and distraction from play and learning. Adults can suffer the same consequences.

Should You Cut Out Snacks All Together?

It's not realistic to completely eliminate snacks from your diet, at least not in one fell swoop. Doing so would be particularly difficult around the holidays, at birthday parties and in the office. In fact, snacks can offer important vitamins and minerals. Careful selection of the snacks you eat can play a role in healthy teeth. Some of the worst snacks are sugary or starchy snacks you nibble on for prolonged periods of time that give the bacteria in plaque a longer opportunity to make acids that cause tooth decay. There are things you can do to minimize your risk of promoting dental disease, both for yourself and for your children.

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Smart Snacking

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Tips to Minimize the Risk of Tooth Decay

First, keep in mind that candy isn't the only culprit. Pizza, bread, chips and many beverages contain sugars. All brown sugar, honey, molasses, and syrups also react with bacteria in the mouth to produce acids. All these foods are potentially damaging to teeth. Remember that healthy meals and snacks should include a variety of foods from the basic food groups such as fruits and vegetables, whole grains, milk and dairy products, meat, nuts and seeds. Grain products like bread, even some fresh fruits, if eaten in excess, may promote tooth decay.

Other Snack Tips Include:

- Choose sugary foods less often. When you do consume sweets, try to do so during meals. Saliva production increases during meals and helps neutralize acid production and rinse food particles from the mouth.
 - Drink water instead of any sugary drink. Water simply can't be beat for a healthy drink. It does an excellent job of rinsing the teeth, diluting the acids, and when fluoridated, can actually repair early tooth decay and promote the growth and development of stronger teeth.
 - Choose nutritious foods such as fresh fruits, raw vegetables, whole grains, dairy products, meat, and nuts for in-between snacks. Consider chewing sugarless gum afterwards. Sugarless gum is another way of promoting saliva production. It's also a good idea to drink optimally fluoridated water with your snacks. (If you choose bottled water, check the label for fluoride content). As an alternative, choose a beverage that's low in sugar and acids. Slice up bananas, strawberries, and kiwi for a colorful and tasty snack. Toddlers love finger foods.
- Brush your teeth at least twice daily, and after snacking whenever possible. Use fluoridated toothpaste and floss daily. ADA accepted dental products are recommended.
 - Floss daily or use another kind of interdental cleaner to remove plaque from teeth.
 - See your dentist for regular checkups.

Before you reach for your next snack, whether it is for yourself or your child, be mindful about the selection you make. Ask yourself if the snack is made with primarily sugar, or is it a chewy snack? Will you be able to rinse or brush your teeth following the snack? How many times during the day have you eaten or given your children sugary snacks? Eating the right foods can help protect you from tooth decay and other diseases. Healthy snacks are not just good for your body – they are good for your teeth.

Sources: www.cdc.gov, www.nidcr.nih.gov, www.ada.org