

Diet, Nutrition and Dental Health



Good nutrition is essential for good physical health. Nutrition also plays a key role in the development and maintenance of a healthy mouth. The foods we eat affect our teeth. Good dental health begins early in life and must be practiced throughout life.

How do teeth decay?

Germ (bacteria) in our mouth grow on teeth every day. They form a sticky layer over the teeth called plaque. The bacteria in the plaque use sugars in the things we drink and eat, and make acids. The acids break down the outer and inner layers of the teeth (demineralization). If plaque is not removed by brushing and flossing, then the acids will continue to attack the outer (enamel) and inner (dentin) layers of the teeth and a hole (tooth decay) can form.

Sugars

Germ in the mouth need sugar for food. Sugar is a carbohydrate. Therefore, any carbohydrate is a source of food and energy for bacteria. Sugars can take many forms: white, raw or brown sugar, honey molasses, dextrose or corn syrup. Sucrose (table sugar) is the carbohydrate bacteria prefer. However, other carbohydrates such as fructose (sugar in fruits), lactose (sugar in milk) and glucose, will support bacterial growth.

Fluoride

Fluoride intake from birth has been shown to reduce caries by as much as 60%. Fluoride is incorporated into the teeth during tooth development making them tooth resistant. The drinking or tap water in Barbados is not fluoridated. Alternative fluoride sources include: fluoride drops or tablets and fluoride toothpaste or mouthwash.

Diet in Infancy, Childhood and Adolescence

Good nutrition is equally important during infancy, childhood and adolescence. One preventable dental problem that affects young children is nursing bottle syndrome. It is characterized by rapid decay of the primary upper teeth and some of the lower back molars. The lower front teeth are seldom affected.

This condition develops when a child is given a carbohydrate drink or food at bed or naptime. When the child is awake and feeding saliva flow helps wash sugars away from teeth. As the child falls asleep sucking, saliva flow decreases and the sugars pool around the teeth and provide an excellent feeding ground for bacteria. Painful decay results from this practice and infections and abscesses can develop. Premature loss of the teeth may result in the child developing poor "tongue thrust." This can cause poor teeth alignment, speech problems and future orthodontic treatment.

All of these problems can be avoided by never allowing a child to fall asleep with a bottle or food in her/his mouth.

Quick facts

- All carbs contribute to cavities not just sugars.
- Sticky foods are more likely to cause cavities.
- Allow at least two hours between meals.
- Soft drinks have about 16 teaspoons of sugar!!
- If you look after your teeth you can keep them forever.
- Teeth are the hardest part of the body.



- You can get cavities from fruits and vegetables.
- It is not really the quantity of sugar but more the frequency of sugar intake that causes cavities
- Milk and milk products are thought to protect against tooth decay.
- Milk does not encourage extra mucous production.

Tooth-friendly foods and drinks

- Dairy products: milk, low-fat cheese, yoghurt.
- If you can't have dairy products look for foods which have calcium added.
- Don't have lots of snacks between meals, especially ones with sugars and acids. (Even healthy foods like raisins should be eaten in moderation.)
- Choose water as your main drink.
- Even though all foods with sugars can cause cavities, there are 'good' sugars and 'bad' sugars.
- Fresh fruits and vegetables are an example of good sugars.
- Remember that liquid medicines and cough drops can have sugar in them which can cause decay.
- Also remember that acid in drinks like orange juice softens the enamel.
- Eat in moderation foods with hidden sugars: cakes, cereals, cream soups, milk chocolate, scrambled eggs, ketchup, pancakes, cheese sauce, medicines, etc.
- Be a friend to nuts, like almonds.
- Remember, if we had no sugars in our diet, we could not get cavities.

We hope that this information has helped you better understand the relationship of diet and nutrition to dental health. If you have any questions please do not hesitate to call us, as we are always here to help.

Eat Healthy!