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Diet and Tooth Decay

Soon after brushing your teeth, a thin, sticky layer of bacteria forms on the surface of all your teeth. This layer of bacteria is called plaque.

When you eat anything sugary, the bacteria in plaque turns the sugar into the energy they need, producing acid at the same time. The acid softens and dissolves the hard enamel surface of the teeth (demineralisation). Over time, frequent demineralisation causes cavities to form in your teeth. This is called tooth decay, or caries.

How can I prevent decay?

Reduce the amount of food and drinks containing sugar, and more importantly reduce the number of times a day that you eat or drink sugary foods and drink. Try to have sugary foods and drinks only at meal times and keep to an absolute minimum.

Sugary foods include cakes, chocolate, all sweets and toffees, sweet popcorn, cordial, squash, fizzy drinks especially cola, lemonade, cherryade etc. cereals with chocolate and sugar coatings, biscuits, also muesli and fruit bars are full of sugar. Especially avoid packets of sweets that are consumed or sucked over prolonged periods. Much better that they are eaten in one go or better still as part of a meal. Mints & boiled sweets are especially bad.

The worst time to eat or drink sugary foods and drinks is just before bedtime as the amount of saliva we produce is decreased during sleep. Saliva helps neutralise the plaque acids in the mouth and can help prevent decay from occurring. Never drink anything but water during the night.

Always read manufacturers labels for hidden sugars in foods, drinks and medicines, and where possible buy products which contain less or no sugar. Artificial sweeteners or sugar substitutes do not cause decay.

Sugars are often disguised on labels, so check them for:

Sucrose, Fructose, Maltodextrin, Glucose, Maltose and Honey.

The sugar intake of a child's diet is 100% controllable. Consequently, dental decay and the associated pain and trauma it can cause our children is 100% preventable.

'Safe Snacks'

When eating between meals, it is much better to replace a sugared snack with a 'safe snack' and instead have the sugary one at the end of your meal. This will reduce the sugar frequency as your meal will probably have hidden sugars in it anyway. The best drinks in between mealtimes are water and milk.

Examples of safe snacks are –

Milk, cheese, plain yoghurt, pasta, rice, vegetables, fresh fruit, crackers, toast, nuts, eggs, bread sticks, pitta bread, crumpets, potato cakes, toast: try spreads like marmite, peanut butter and cheese spread instead of marmalade and jams. Plain popcorn, plain cereals, crisps like Wotsits, Twiglets, Quavers, Hula Hoops but check labels first as some crisps do contain added sugar.