

Dental Hygiene

In addition to brushing and flossing, a healthful diet protects teeth from decay and keeps the gums healthy. Read on to discover how to keep your smile safe and strong. Tooth decay (cavities and dental caries) and gum disease are caused by colonies of bacteria that constantly



coat the teeth with a sticky film called plaque. If plaque is not brushed away, these bacteria break down the sugars and starches in foods to produce acids that wear away the tooth enamel. The plaque also hardens into tartar, which can lead to gum inflammation, or gingivitis.

A well-balanced diet provides the minerals, vitamins, and other nutrients essential for healthy teeth and gums. Fluoride, occurring naturally in foods and water, or added to the water supply, can be a powerful tool in fighting decay. It can reduce the rate of cavities by as much as 60 percent.

The Sugar Factor and Tooth Decay

Sucrose, most familiar to us as granulated sugar, is the leading cause of tooth decay, but it is far from the only culprit. Although sugary foods, including cookies, candies, and sodas, are major offenders, starchy foods (such as breads and cereals) also play an important part in tooth decay. When starches mix with amylase, an enzyme in saliva, the result is an acid bath that erodes the enamel and makes teeth more susceptible to decay. If starchy foods linger in the mouth, the acid bath is prolonged, and the potential for damage is all the greater.

Be careful when eating dried fruits. Dried fruits can have an adverse effect on teeth, because they are high in sugar and cling to the teeth. Even unsweetened fruit juices can contribute to tooth decay — they are acidic and contain relatively high levels of simple sugars.

Fresh fruits, especially apples, are better choices. Fresh fruit, although both sweet and acidic, is much less likely to cause a problem, because chewing stimulates the saliva flow. Saliva decreases mouth acidity and washes away food particles. Apples, for example, have been called nature's toothbrush because they stimulate the gums, increase saliva flow and reduce the build-up of cavity-causing bacteria. A chronically dry mouth also contributes to decay. Saliva flow slows during sleep; going to bed without brushing the teeth is especially harmful. Certain drugs, including those used for high blood pressure, also cut down saliva flow.

Poor Diet and Gum Disease

More teeth are lost through gum disease than through tooth decay. Gum disease is likely to strike anyone who neglects oral hygiene or eats a poor diet. Particularly at risk are people with alcoholism, malnutrition, or AIDS/HIV infection or who are being treated with steroid drugs or certain cancer chemotherapies. Regular brushing and flossing help to prevent puffy, sore, and inflamed gums.

Gingivitis, a very common condition that causes the gums to redden, swell, and bleed, is typically caused by the gradual buildup of plaque. Treatment requires good dental hygiene and removal of plaque by a dentist or dental hygienist. Left untreated, gingivitis can lead to periodontitis — an advanced infection of the gums that causes teeth to loosen and fall out. There may even be more serious consequences of gum disease. Studies have shown a link between poor oral health and heart disease. Bleeding gums apparently provide an entry port for bacteria or viruses that can cause heart problems. Women with tooth or gum problems are also more likely to give birth to premature babies.

Bleeding gums may also be a sign that your intake of vitamin C is deficient. Be sure that your diet includes plenty of fresh fruits and vegetables every day; munching on hard, fibrous foods, such as celery sticks or carrots stimulates the gums.

Helpful Foods for Preventing Cavities

You can protect your teeth by concluding meals with foods that do not promote cavities and may even prevent them. For instance, aged cheeses help prevent cavities if consumed at the end of a meal. Chewing sugarless gum stimulates the flow of saliva, which decreases acid and flushes out food particles. Rinsing your mouth and brushing your teeth after eating are important strategies to prevent cavities.

Here are some tips:

- Consume plenty of...
- ◆ Calcium-rich foods, such as low-fat milk, yogurt and cheese.
- ◆ Fresh fruits and vegetables for vitamins A and C, and for chewing in order to promote healthy gums.
- ◆ Tea, which is a good source of fluoride.
- ◆ Limit dried fruits and other sticky foods that lodge between the teeth.
- ◆ Avoid sweet drinks and snacks.

Steady sipping of acidic drinks for prolonged periods.
Also remember, party food and drink is for special occasions not for everyday consumption, because they have more sugar than you need which destroy your teeth.

Is It A Medical Emergency?

Even healthy kids get hurt and sick sometimes. In some cases, you may panic and want to head straight to the emergency room at the nearest hospital. In other cases, it's more difficult to determine whether an injury or an illness needs the attention of a medical professional, or whether you can take care of it at home.

Ultimately, different problems require different levels of care. And when your child needs some sort of medical help, you have lots of options:

- ◆ **Handle the problem at home.** Many minor injuries and illnesses, including some cuts, poison ivy rashes, coughs, colds, scrapes, and bruises, can be handled with home care and over-the-counter (OTC) treatments.
- ◆ **Call your doctor.** This is a good option in most cases. If you're unsure of the level of medical care your child needs, your child's doctor — or a nurse who works in the office — can help you determine what steps to take and how to take them.
- ◆ **Visit an urgent care center.** An urgent care center can be a good option at night and on weekends when your child's doctor may not be in the office, but it's not necessarily a medical emergency. At these clinics, you can usually get things like x-rays, stitches and care for other minor injuries that aren't life threatening yet require medical attention on the same day.
- ◆ **Visit a hospital emergency room.** An ER — also called an emergency department (ED) — can handle a wide variety of serious problems, such as severe bleeding, head trauma, seizures, meningitis, breathing difficulties, dehydration, and bacterial infections.
- ◆ **Call 911 for an ambulance.** Some situations are so serious that you need the help of trained medical personnel on the way to the hospital. These might include if your child: has been in a car accident, has a head or neck injury, has ingested too much medication and is now hard to arouse, or is not breathing or is turning blue. In these cases it's best to dial 911 for an ambulance.

It's hard to make these judgment calls if you don't have a medical degree. You don't want to rush to the ER if it's really not an emergency and can wait until a doctor's appointment. On the other hand, you don't want to hesitate to get medical attention if your child needs treatment right away. If you have questions, the best thing you can do is call your child's doctor. As your child grows — and inevitably runs into more sickness and calamities — you'll learn to trust yourself to decide when it's an emergency.

Remember that in cases when you know the problem is minor, it's best to go to an urgent care center, see your doctor, or handle it at home because the more people who show up at the ER with non-emergencies, the longer everyone has to wait for care. When you can't determine whether it's an emergency or not, call your child's doctor.

Should I Go to the ER?

Here are some examples of when to go the ER:

- ◆ your child has some difficulty breathing or shortness of breath
- ◆ there's a change in your child's mental status, such as suddenly becoming unusually sleepy or difficult to arouse, disoriented, confused, not making sense
- ◆ your child has a cut or break in the skin that is bleeding and won't stop
- ◆ your child has a stiff neck along with a fever
- ◆ your child has a rapid heartbeat that doesn't slow down
- ◆ your child accidentally ingests a poisonous substance or too much medication
- ◆ your child has severe bleeding or head trauma

