



There's No Trick to Good Oral Health

Halloween ghosts and goblins will arrive shortly. For many of us, that means candy and sugary treats around the house. Tasty as they might be, sweet snacks aren't without some dangers to teeth. Parents and caregivers play an important role in establishing healthy eating habits and making sure children brush and floss every day. This is more important than ever at Halloween, when children usually eat a larger amount of sweet treats.

Tooth Decay Is an Infection

Despite advances in technology and education, tooth decay is still a leading infectious, transmissible disease among children. The process of tooth decay requires three primary factors: bacteria in dental plaque (the primary oral bacteria responsible for causing cavities is called streptococcus mutans), sugar and a vulnerable tooth surface (hard to clean surfaces). After consuming foods or beverages containing sugar (carbohydrates), bacteria convert the sugar on the tooth surfaces into acids. These acids damage tooth enamel over time by dissolving the mineral structure of the teeth producing tooth decay which weakens the teeth. If left undisturbed, damaged tooth structure continues to grow, creating holes in the teeth or further tooth decay.

Tooth decay can cause pain and lead to infections in surrounding tissues and tooth loss if not treated properly. Signs of tooth decay include white spots, tooth discolorations, holes in the teeth and sensitivity to temperature changes. Untreated tooth decay often results in persistent pain, inability to eat comfortably or chew well, and embarrassing discolored and damaged teeth.

Tooth Decay Is Contagious

Tooth decay can spread from parents and caregivers to babies. Although babies are not born with decay-causing bacteria in their mouths, many unsuspecting parents and caregivers pass these bacteria to their children by saliva transmission. The higher the levels of decay-causing bacteria in the parent's or caregiver's mouth, the more likely the child will become infected. Bacteria can spread easily through behaviors such as:

- Kissing with a saliva transfer
- Sharing cups, utensils, water bottles and toothbrushes
- Pre-chewing a baby's food
- "Cleaning" a baby's pacifier or the nipple of the baby's bottle by putting it in the parent's mouth
- Testing the temperature of a baby's bottle by mouth or tasting a baby's food on the feeding spoon
- Allowing a baby to put hands into parent's or caregiver's mouth and then into their own mouth

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Babies and Primary Teeth

Primary (baby) teeth are susceptible to decay as soon as they appear. Decay can occur when baby teeth are frequently exposed to liquids containing sugar that is not removed (cleaned), such as milk, formula, fruit juice, sodas and other sweetened drinks. When children are allowed to drink sugary liquids from a bottle or sippy cup, the sugars can pool around the teeth and gums and feed the bacteria that cause decay.

It's Not Just White Sugar

Candy and sugary foods are not the only culprits causing tooth decay. Many foods, including healthy foods, contain complex carbohydrates that metabolize into sugars. Examples include pizza, bread, some fresh fruits and many snack foods. These foods can have the same result as those with high sugar content. In addition, brown sugar, honey, molasses and syrups also react with bacteria in the mouth to produce acids.

Tooth Decay Can Be Prevented

When sugar and starches are left on the teeth for 20 minutes or more, they fuel bacteria which will attack teeth. Properly cleaning teeth and choosing healthy foods can prevent tooth decay, gum disease and possible tooth loss.

Tips for Healthy Teeth

- Encourage children to make good food choices and to eat regular, healthy and balanced meals and snacks.
- 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 rinses food particles from the mouth. The American Dental Association (ADA) has indicated that stickier substances like raisins and gummy bears are more likely to be retained on teeth and less likely to be washed out from all surfaces on the teeth by saliva.

- Drink tap water instead of sugary drinks. Water does an excellent job rinsing the teeth, diluting the acids, and when fluoridated, can actually promote the growth and development of stronger teeth.
- Choose nutritious snacks, such as fresh fruits and raw vegetables, whole grains, dairy products, meat and nuts. Consider chewing sugarless gum, which promotes saliva production.
- Parents and caregivers should be sure that children's teeth are brushed twice per day, especially before bedtime. ADA accepted dental products are recommended.
- Limit hard candies, which are high in sugar and stay in the mouth for a long time. When chewing hard candies, the teeth can also chip or crack. Children can also choke on hard candies.
- Floss daily to remove plaque from in between teeth.
- Visit the dentist for regular checkups. The frequency of dental visits should be based upon your individual needs and discussed with your dentist.
- Establish a daily oral health care routine, which includes brushing and flossing, and eating a nutritious diet.

Parents and caregivers can minimize the ghoulish effects that treats can have on children's teeth. Remember, tooth decay can be prevented by selecting healthy foods and brushing and flossing every day.

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