



Smart Snacking

Candy and sweet snacks are everywhere. Whether it's that last morsel of chocolate cake in the office break room, candy-filled office vending machines or desktop candy jars, the choice to indulge or not is ever present. Sweet snacks and candy pose danger to your teeth, but the culprit is the sugars in many snacks and candy. Sucrose and starches are the predominant dietary carbohydrates in modern societies. The relationship between starches in food and dental caries (cavities) is continuously debated. Studies of caries in animals, human plaque, and tooth enamel/dentin demineralization leave no doubt that processed food starches in modern diets possess a significant potential to develop caries. When starches are combined with high sugar diets, cavity development is more elevated.

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 in the mouth creating a sticky film on the surface of the teeth called plaque. Sugar and starch act as fuel for these bacteria, leading to the formation of acid in the plaque 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 weakens, which can lead to tooth decay.

Saliva helps wash the tooth surface and clear bacteria. Bacteria multiply quickly. With prolonged in-between meal snacking, saliva's protective abilities can become overwhelmed by this bacteria. The American Dental Association has indicated that the stickier things are, like gummy bears and caramels, 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 adults and children with untreated oral disease is often persistent pain, inability to eat comfortably or chew well, embarrassing discolored and damaged teeth, and distraction that can lead to learning compromise.

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Tips to Minimize the Risk of Tooth Decay

First, keep in mind that candy (sugar) isn't the only culprit. Pizza, bread, chips (starches) and many beverages contain high levels of sugar, including brown sugar, honey, molasses, and syrups. All these foods or combinations of 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, and even some fresh fruits, if eaten in excess, can 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 rinses food particles away from teeth.
- Drink water instead of a 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 help to repair early tooth decay 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, if water drinking water is not possible, choose a beverage that's low in sugar content. Slice up bananas, strawberries, and kiwi for a colorful and tasty snack.

- 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(s) you make. Ask yourself if the snack is made primarily with 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:

Centers for Disease Control: www.cdc.gov;

National Institute of Dental and Craniofacial Research: www.nidcr.nih.gov;

American Dental Association: www.ada.org

National Center for Biotechnology Information: www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov