

Diet and tooth decay in early childhood



Oral bacteria from mum to bub

Unconsciously, mums transmit oral bacteria from their mouth to their bubs (via shared utensils etc). An infant's mouth is not generally colonised with bacteria until teeth begin to erupt (around 4 months plus). It seems that the growth of bacteria is most likely a result of this sharing. To reduce bacterial growth in your baby's mouth, avoid shared foods and utensils, don't suck dummies, keep a close eye on oral hygiene and see your dentist regularly.

“Over the past decade, the intake of soft drinks has increased by around 30%...”

Two top tips to prevention

1. Good oral hygiene
2. Healthy eating habits

Look after first teeth

Children's first teeth, often referred to as 'milk teeth', are as important as their permanent teeth. These teeth play an important role in creating the position for adult teeth, developing the jaw and face, and helping the progress of speech

How common is tooth decay?

As children get older, they increasingly develop tooth decay. By the age of five, about 1% of children have tooth decay, while by 15 years this rises to over 50%. So, if we can establish good habits in diet and dental hygiene early on, these figures are sure to drop.

What is tooth decay?

Commonly, tooth decay in children is a combination of a number of factors, including bacteria around the gums which is promoted by sugars, namely **sucrose**; eating habits and patterns; and dental care routines. The bacteria in our mouth prefer to use sucrose (common table sugar) over other forms of sugars. Such fermentable sugars are used to produce acid, enabling bacteria to stick to our teeth.

What causes tooth decay?

A diet that is high in sugars can increase the risk of tooth decay. Both how often sugar is eaten and the length of time it is allowed to stay in contact with the teeth are major influences. Keep in mind that not all sugars are bad for teeth. Sugars found naturally in such foods as fruits and vegetables have little or no effect on tooth decay and offer many health benefits.

We know with certainty that fizzy drinks (and, to a lesser extent, some juices) cause tooth decay. Poor eating habits are also a potential problem, for example, not eating breakfast or eating too little fruit and vegetables.

Factors involved in tooth decay include:

- ★ Frequent intake of sugary foods.
- ★ High intake of foods with added sugar (sucrose).
- ★ The use of feeding bottles with carbohydrate-containing and/or sugary fluids, including milk.
- ★ The use of bottles to pacify or help your child to sleep.
- ★ Too much fruit juice.
- ★ Increased intake of other beverages such as cordials and fizzy drinks.
- ★ Nutrient deficiencies (e.g. vitamins B2, B12, C and D).

How can you prevent it?

Encourage your child to brush their teeth at least twice a day. It is also a good idea to brush after sugary foods or drinks e.g. after eating sweets. Keep in mind that good oral hygiene and regular check-ups are likely to overcome some of the negative effects of sugar on teeth.

An interesting recent finding is that **cheese** appears to have a protective effect against the processes of tooth decay. We can expect to see more information and support on this in the near future. In fact, some dental agencies in the United States suggest that children should eat a small piece of cheese after a sugary meal or snack when they are not able to brush their teeth.

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Avoid giving children:

- ★ Soft drinks e.g. cola
- ★ Flavoured milk
- ★ Bottles when going to sleep
- ★ Bottles that supply fluid slowly over the day
- ★ Fruit juice
- ★ Cordial
- ★ Coffee or tea
- ★ Lollies and sweets
- ★ Foods with high amounts of added sugars (those with added sugars listed in the top three or four ingredients)

Point of interest: Soft drink consumption and sugar intake

- ★ In Australia, over the past decade, the intake of soft drinks has increased by around 30% (with 13 to 24 year olds being the biggest consumers of these products). Given the amount of sugar contained in these drinks (sometimes up to 9 teaspoons of sugar) this is a dietary trend that we should try to reverse.