



Expert Advice About Cavities and Kids

Questions and (sometimes surprising) answers

My 12-year-old has never had a cavity. I'd like to take credit for that by saying she brushes and flosses regularly and never consumes sugary juices or candy. But the truth is her brushing sometimes consists of a quick swipe and spit, and her favourite beverage is mango juice. Still, for the most part, we've tried to do all the right things to ensure a clean bill of health from our dentist. Here's what the experts say is important to know about dental decay from the moment those little teeth start making an appearance.



Q: What exactly is tooth decay, anyway?

A: Tooth decay starts when the normal bacteria (germs) in your mouth combine with food and saliva to form a sticky substance called plaque that attaches to the teeth. According to the Canadian Dental Association, when your child consumes sugary food or drinks, the bacteria in the dental plaque mix with the sugars to make a mild acid. This acid attacks the hard outer layer of the tooth, called the enamel. If the dental plaque is not removed every day by brushing and flossing, over time, the enamel gets soft and a cavity forms.

Q: How does sugar affect teeth?

A: "Sucrose is the No. 1 bad guy," says Dr. Ian McConnachie, a pediatric dentist in Ottawa, and an ODA Past President. Sucrose is the technical name for table sugar, cane sugar or white sugar and is found in numerous processed foods. Limiting how much and how often your child consumes foods and beverages that contain sugar will help prevent cavities. Sugar in fruit, says Dr. McConnachie, is not as destructive to our teeth, except if it is found in dried fruit or fruit products, which may linger or "stick" to the teeth. Fruit in general is considered to be very tooth-friendly.

Q: What contributes to causing cavities?

A: • **Too little fluoride.** This natural compound makes teeth more resistant to decay and can prevent or even reverse tooth decay that has started. It's added to the water supply in many communities, as well as to toothpastes. And dentists sometimes apply it to teeth as part of a child's normal checkup.

"Some children who come from non-fluoridated areas certainly have more decay than those from fluoridated areas," says Dr. Rick Caldwell, a dentist with a busy practice in New Liskeard, Ont., and President-Elect of the ODA.

- **Medications.** There are many medications that can alter or reduce the saliva in your child's mouth and puts him or her at a much higher risk of developing tooth decay, says Dr. McConnachie.
- **Poor oral hygiene.** Brush, floss and see that your child visits your dentist regularly for exams and professional cleanings. "Kids who have good, healthy diets, brush their teeth well a few times a day and floss regularly wouldn't be expected to have a huge decay issue," says Dr. Caldwell.
- **Bedtime bottles and sippy cups.** Don't let your child fall asleep with a bottle or sippy cup filled with juice or milk. Those sugary liquids (yes, even milk contains some sugar) can pool in her mouth and cause baby bottle tooth decay. If your baby is thirsty, it's a good idea to only offer water after the evening toothbrushing, advises Dr. McConnachie.

Q: Is it OK to give my child healthy snacks such as granola bars and raisins?

A: They may be nutritious, says Dr. McConnachie, but they're not great foods for growing teeth since they are high in sugar and stick to the teeth for a long time. If you give them to your child as a treat, make sure he brushes well afterward. Even better, choose tooth-friendly snacks like cheese cubes and raw fruits and veggies the majority of the time.

Q: What are the warning signs of tooth decay?

A: Any colour change on any teeth. Also, any tooth that is sensitive to hot, cold, sweetness or pressure. If your child is experiencing any of these symptoms, talk to your dentist.

Q: Why all the fuss about taking care of baby teeth when they're just going to fall out?

A: "If baby teeth aren't cared for carefully, they can decay, cause pain and infection, and that can affect the spacing of permanent teeth," says Dr. McConnachie.

Q: Is there anything new in the treatment of dental decay?

A: Nowadays, dentists put more emphasis on assessing the various risk factors in a child's mouth that puts him or her at a low, moderate or high risk for decay, says Dr. McConnachie. "And then we want to alter those risk factors through dietary changes, or hygiene adjustments or possibly adding in fluoride." The goal is to stop the process before the cavity is formed.

Q: Any other tips for preventing cavities?

A: Chew gum. We're not kidding. For the high-risk patient, gum that contains xylitol may actually lower the bacteria that causes decay and may reverse early cavities, says Dr. McConnachie. The American Dental Association (ADA) agrees; it has studies that show chewing sugarless gum for 20 minutes promotes the flow of saliva, which helps wash away food and other debris.¹ But, cautions the ADA, it's obviously not a substitute for brushing and flossing.

And, finally, don't share utensils with your child or lick off a dirty pacifier and put it back in her mouth (yes, some parents do this). The bacteria that starts cavities can be passed from parent or caregiver to child (more often from the mother, says Dr. McConnachie) and may cause tooth decay. ■

Visit youroralhealth.ca

for brushing and flossing tips.



¹ For more information about preventing cavities, visit the ADA's website: www.mouthhealthy.org