

Eating Right for Your Dental Health

What we eat is significant to our overall health. General guidelines should include balance and moderation and should involve choices from the five major food groups.

1. Dairy (milk, yogurt, cheese)
2. Meat (poultry, fish)
3. Fruits
4. Vegetables
5. Whole grains (breads, cereals)

Depending on your lifestyle, vitamin and mineral supplements may be necessary.

If snacking is necessary, substitute foods that most people like but that don't promote tooth decay.

A major cause of cavities (tooth decay) is the breakdown of refined sugars by bacteria, turning the sugars to acid, which then dissolves the tooth enamel. That's why plaque (a sticky mixture of bacteria, food and debris) removal is so important. Studies have shown that the nature and frequency of sugar intake is more important than the amount. If the sugary food is very sticky, like caramel, gummy bears or jam, it will remain on the teeth for a longer period of time. If you or your children are constantly snacking on sugary foods or sipping soda pop, you should be aware that your teeth are under continuous acid attack.

How can you prevent this problem? Avoid having sugar in the mouth for long periods of time. Stay away from sucking candies and chewing gum containing sugar and refrain from drinking soft drinks regularly (unless sugar-free). Try to cut down on the number of snacks per day. If snacking is necessary, substitute foods that most people like but that don't promote tooth decay. Examples are popcorn, fresh fruits and vegetables, nuts, and cheese.

Consuming sugary foods with a meal or for dessert has a less detrimental effect, because increased saliva flow during meals helps to wash the food away. Also, most people brush their teeth after meals. Keeping this in mind, it is better for children to eat sweets at a time and place that allows them to brush soon afterwards.

A balanced diet is also important to keep bones and gums healthy. Foods rich in vitamin C (citrus fruits and juices, leafy vegetable, potatoes), vitamin B12 (dairy, meat) and folic acid (spinach, broccoli) will help strengthen gums and supporting soft tissue. Of course, calcium from dairy foods and dark green leafy vegetables are important too as they are necessary for the development and maintenance of strong teeth and bones. For those who are lactose intolerant, calcium supplements are readily available.

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