

Dental Decay Prevention

What is Dental Decay?

Dental (tooth) decay is a **preventable disease** caused by bacteria (germs), such as *Streptococcus mutans*, that live in the mouth. These bacteria need a certain type of environment in order to live and grow, so it is important not to give them that environment. Bacteria are so small that a large number must be present in order for them to cause damage. There are six ways to decrease the numbers of bacteria and help prevent dental decay.



Easy Ways to Prevent Dental Decay:

Healthy Eating Habits

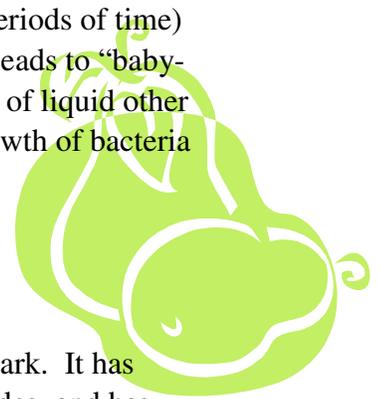
- * Avoid sugar. Bacteria need a food source in order to grow, and refined sugar is their favorite food. Sugar can be found “hidden” everywhere: not just in candy, gum, soft drinks, and breakfast cereal. Soft drinks and the “sour” candies are the most destructive because they have strong acids that have been added (check the list of ingredients!), in addition to sugar. The acid weakens the tooth enamel and makes it easier for decay to occur.
- * Do not use sweets or dessert as a reward for your children or yourself.
- * Do not allow babies or children to fall asleep (or walk around for long periods of time) with a bottle or sippy cup (unless it has plain water in it). This practice leads to “baby-bottle tooth decay,” which can quickly destroy the front teeth. A puddle of liquid other than water (even milk) around a baby’s teeth and gums increases the growth of bacteria and leads to rapid development of decay*.

Use 100% Xylitol Gum or Mints/Candy

*

Xylitol is a natural, non-sugar sweetener made from plants such as birch bark. It has been used extensively in European and Scandinavian countries for decades, and has recently become more available in the U.S.

- * Many years of research have shown **Xylitol** to cause a decrease in decay potential and to cause “healing” of decay at its very beginning stages. Studies even showed that when children’s caregivers, who habitually chewed **Xylitol** gum, had significantly less decay years later! This is amazing stuff!
- * Plaque bacteria can’t break down **Xylitol** when they eat it, so they die. Although not to the same degree as sugar, “artificial” sweeteners can be broken down by plaque germs, so decay could still occur; however, artificially sweetened foods have much less decay-causing potential than sugar.



Sealants for Grooves of Back Teeth

- *In order to grow, bacteria need a place where they can be undisturbed. The grooves in the back teeth provide the perfect environment for decay to occur.
- *Sealants can help prevent the bacteria from causing decay in these areas that are unreachable by a toothbrush.



Brushing and Flossing

- *Plaque is the sticky film on teeth that allows bacteria to accumulate in large numbers. It should be removed 2 to 3 times a day by brushing and flossing.
- *A flossing calendar is a great way to keep up with flossing every day. Keep it on your bathroom mirror and use stickers or a pen to mark it every time you floss. If it's done three times a day for one month, flossing will become a daily habit.

Fluoride Carefully Used EVERY Day

- *Using stannous fluoride after brushing and flossing allows you to “sterilize” your mouth by killing the bacteria. The fluoride also strengthens tooth surfaces, making them more resistant to decay. It has the added benefit of decreasing root surface sensitivity, and **it works for up to 16 hours!**
- *Fluoride only takes about two minutes a day. It should be used nightly by rinsing or brushing as directed, with a prescription-strength fluoride rinse or gel.
- *It is best to use fluoride at night because the mouth's saliva flow decreases significantly during sleep. Without the benefit of saliva, the acid content in the mouth increases and causes an increased potential for tooth decay.

Visit Your Dentist

- *Beginning decay can't be “felt.” It is only detected in early stages by direct vision and an x-ray examination by your dentist. Decay can form both in places where tooth surfaces contact old restorations (fillings, crowns, etc.) and where there is no previous restoration.
- *If you should suspect decay, make an appointment with your dentist so the problem can be dealt with quickly, to avoid more serious issues later.

