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Your Diet and Your Smile

The foods you choose and how often you eat affect your general health as well as the health of your teeth and gums. Today, Americans are eating record numbers of sugary sodas, sweetened fruit drinks, and non-nutritious snacks, and over time these foods can make cavities in teeth.

Some foods begin breaking down in our mouths before they even reach the digestive tract. Bacteria in the mouth use sugars to produce acids which can cause the minerals inside a tooth's enamel to dissolve, or demineralize. Even eating "good" foods can cause damage to the teeth, as almost all foods, including vegetables and milk, have some type of sugar. Because many of those foods contain important nutrients, we must eat them, but we should read food labels and choose foods and beverages that are low in added sugars. Also, tissues in your mouth have more difficulty resisting infection if your diet lacks certain nutrients. Periodontal disease can worsen and progress faster in people who do not consume enough valuable nutrients and may result in tooth loss.

How many times a day we eat or drink affects our susceptibility to tooth decay. Sipping a soft drink, juice, or coffee with sugar for a couple of hours is more damaging than drinking the entire beverage with a meal. Small, healthy snacks between meals are recommended for good metabolism, but munching on carbohydrate-filled foods during the day increases the amount of time damaging acids come in contact with the teeth. Eating disorders can cause tooth decay and damage to the enamel of the teeth as purging brings stomach acids up into the mouth, causing further demineralization. Consuming large amounts of citrus fruits also can cause enamel to dissolve as it comes in contact with the citric acid.

To help maintain healthy teeth and gums, eat a healthy diet, drink plenty of water, and limit snacks, making sure that the snacks you do eat are nutritious and low in sugar. Drink sweetened beverages with a meal instead of throughout the day. Since saliva helps prevent decay by washing away loose particles and neutralizing damaging acids, chewing sugar-free gum can help fight tooth decay as it increases saliva production. Brushing twice a day with a fluoride toothpaste and flossing daily, as well as seeing your dentist for regular check-ups, are also important for maintaining good oral health.

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