

THE ACID ATTACK

Q What is the main cause of tooth decay?

A Tooth decay happens when sugar reacts with the bacteria in plaque - the sticky coating on your teeth. This forms acids that attack the teeth and destroy the enamel. After this happens many times, the tooth enamel may break down forming a hole or 'cavity'.

Q What about snacks?

A Every time you eat or drink anything sugary, your teeth are under attack for up to one hour. So it is important to keep any sugary foods only to mealtimes and limit the amount of time your mouth is under attack. If you do need to snack between meals, choose foods that do not contain sugar. Savoury snacks such as cheese, raw vegetables or fruit and breadsticks are better.

Q What should I drink?

A Plain, still water or milk are good choices. Soft drinks can increase the risk of dental problems: either the sugar can cause decay or the acid in both normal and diet drinks can dissolve the enamel on the teeth. The risk is higher when you have these drinks between meals.

Sugar-free squashes, if they are completely sugar free, are the safest alternative to water and milk. If you make squash or cordial, be sure that the drink is diluted 1 part cordial to 10 parts water. Some soft drinks contain sweeteners, which are not suitable for young children – ask your dentist or health visitor if you are not sure.

Q Should I brush my teeth after every meal?

A It is important that you brush twice a day. The best times are before breakfast and last thing at night

before you go to bed. Eating and drinking naturally weakens the enamel on your teeth, and brushing straight afterwards can cause tiny particles of enamel to be brushed away. It is best not to brush your teeth until at least 30 minutes after eating.

It is especially important to brush before bed. This is because saliva flow, which is the mouth's own cleaning system, slows down during the night. This leaves the mouth more at risk from decay.

Always use a fluoride toothpaste and look for one carrying our accreditation logo. These products have been clinically and scientifically tested, and a panel of dental experts have decided whether the packaging claims are correct before giving their accreditation badge.

Q Should I stick to fruit and fruit juices?

A Fruit contains acids, but this is only damaging to your teeth if you eat an unusually large amount.

Take fruit juices at meal times; or if you are taking them between meals, try diluting them with water. Or, if you do eat fruit as a snack, try to eat something alkaline such as cheese afterwards. 'Alkalines' cancel out the acid effects of fruit.

Q Do other foods have sugar in them?

A Many processed foods have sugar in them. Always read the list of ingredients on the labels when you are food shopping. Sugar can come in many forms, for example: sucrose, fructose and glucose are just three types. Ask your dentist if you are unsure.

These sugars can all damage your teeth, and the higher up it appears in the list of ingredients, the more sugar there is in the product.

When you are reading the labels remember that 'no added sugar' does not necessarily mean that the product is sugar free. It simply means that no extra sugar has been added. These products may contain sugars such as those listed above, or they may be listed as 'carbohydrates'.

Q Does chewing gum help?

A Chewing gum makes your mouth produce more saliva, which helps to cancel out the acid in your mouth after eating or drinking. It has been proven that using sugar-free chewing gum after meals can prevent tooth decay. However it is important to use only sugar-free gum, as ordinary chewing gum contains sugar and therefore damages your teeth.

Q Can I eat sweets?

A The main point to remember, is that it is not the amount of sugar you eat or drink, but how often you do it. Sweet foods are allowed, but it is important to keep them to mealtimes. As far as diet is concerned, snacking between meals is the biggest cause of tooth decay.

Sugary foods can also contribute to a range of health problems including heart disease and obesity.