



Healthy snacking habits

What's wrong with sugary snacks, anyway?

Sugary snacks taste so good — but they aren't so good for your teeth or your body. The candies, cakes, cookies and other sugary foods that kids love to eat between meals can cause tooth decay. Some sugary foods have a lot of fat in them, too. Kids who consume sugary snacks eat many different kinds of sugar every day, including table sugar (sucrose) and corn sweeteners (fructose). Starchy snacks can also break down into sugars once they're in your mouth.

How do sugars attack your teeth?

Invisible germs called bacteria live in your mouth all the time. Some of these bacteria form a sticky material called plaque on the surface of the teeth. When you put sugar in your mouth, the bacteria in the plaque gobble up the sweet stuff and turn it into acids. These acids are powerful enough to dissolve the hard enamel that covers your teeth. That's how cavities get started. If you don't eat much sugar, the bacteria can't produce as much of the acid that eats away enamel.

How can I "snack smart" to protect myself from tooth decay?

Before you start munching on a snack, ask yourself what's in the food you've chosen. Is it loaded with sugar? If it is, think again. Another choice would be better for your teeth. And keep in mind that certain kinds of sweets can do more damage than others. Goopy or chewy sweets spend more time sticking to the surface of your teeth. Because sticky snacks stay in your mouth longer than foods that you quickly chew and swallow, they give your teeth a longer sugar bath.

You should also think about when and how often you eat snacks. Do you nibble on sugary snacks many times throughout the day, or do you usually just have dessert after dinner? Damaging acids form in your mouth every time you eat a sugary snack. The acids continue to affect your teeth for at least 20 minutes before they are neutralized and can't do any more harm. So, the more times you eat sugary snacks during the day, the more often you feed bacteria the fuel they need to cause tooth decay.

If you eat sweets, it's best to eat them as dessert after a main meal instead of several times a day between meals. Whenever you eat sweets — in any meal or snack — brush your teeth well with a fluoride toothpaste afterward or at least rinse vigorously with water.

When you're deciding about snacks, think about:

- The number of times a day you eat sugary snacks
- How long the sugary food stays in your mouth
- The texture of the sugary food (Chewy? Sticky?)
- If you snack after school, before bedtime, or other times during the day, choose something without a lot of sugar or fat. There are lots of tasty, filling snacks that are less harmful to your teeth—and the rest of your body — than foods loaded with sugars and low in nutritional value. Snack smart!
- Low-fat choices like raw vegetables, fresh fruits, or whole-grain crackers or bread are smart choices, but even fresh fruit in excess can cause decay. Next time you reach for a snack, pick a food from the list below or make up your own menu of non-sugary, low-fat snack foods from the basic food groups.



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How can you snack smart? Be choosy!

- Fresh fruits and raw vegetables
- Broccoli and dip
- Celery with peanut butter
- Carrots and hummus or dip
- Cucumbers
- Tomatoes
- Unsweetened fruit and vegetable juices
- Canned fruits in natural juices
- Whole grain bread
- Unsweetened cereals
- Unbuttered popcorn
- Unsweetened yogurt
- Cheese
- Cottage cheese
- Chicken
- Turkey
- Sliced meats
- Pumpkin seeds
- Sunflower seeds
- Nuts

Remember to:

- Choose sugary foods less often, and avoid High Fructose Corn Syrup (HFCS) which is now sometimes called “fructose syrup” or simply “fructose”
- Avoid sweets between meals
- Eat a variety of low or non-fat foods from the basic groups
- Brush your teeth with fluoride toothpaste after snacks and meals; or at least rinse vigorously with water