



Tooth Decay in Children

What foods cause tooth decay in children?

Many different types of food can cause tooth decay in children, not just candy and chocolate. High fructose corn syrup (the popular sweetener found in most processed snack food and drinks like soda) has the most potential to cause decay- but most people don't realize that the natural sugars found in fruits, milk, and honey are just as potent. A diet high in sweet drinks like soda, fruit punch, apple juice, orange juice, Gatorade, sweetened iced tea, lemonade, chocolate milk and regular milk (basically all liquids besides water and "diet" drinks) will cause decay. Snacks made with high fructose corn syrup (packaged cakes, etc.) or that are high in carbohydrates, like crackers and potato chips can also cause decay when they are consumed regularly throughout the day. Sticky fruit snacks are particularly damaging because the natural sugars stick between the teeth for hours.

My children rarely drink soda or eat candy. Are they still at risk for tooth decay?

Yes. Any prolonged exposure to simple carbohydrates or sugary drinks or snacks can cause damage. Each time the food hits the teeth it gives an extra meal to the bacteria, allowing them to multiply and produce more of the acid that eats into the teeth. Have your child drink a juice box all at once, then take it away and have them rinse with water. After a healthy snack, have your child rinse with water and swallow it. This washes the sugar and bacterial acids off of the teeth. Avoid snacks such as fruit roll-ups or fig-newtons which have sticky sugar in them that sticks to the teeth and cannot be rinsed away. It is best to keep separate meals, snacks, juice, or milk "doses" to a minimum. Compare the following examples:

Diet likely to cause decay:

- Snack with juice box
- Yogurt and juice box
- Chocolate milk and cookies
- Ice cream an hour after dinner
- Juice box or milk before bed

Healthier Diet:

- **Breakfast** (juice ok with meal)
- Healthy snack with water
- **Lunch** (milk or juice ok with meal)
- Healthy snack with water
- **Dinner** (milk ok with meal)
- Ice cream for dessert right after eating, followed by water rinse

Aren't natural foods like milk, apple juice, and fruit good for you?

Yes. In fact, the current MyPlate food pyramid recommends half of the diet being fruits and vegetables. The problem comes from "grazing" throughout the day, so try to eat these healthy foods at mealtime. "Sippy cups" and bottles with milk or fruit juices should never be allowed in bed. Toddlers can get devastating decay from bathing their teeth in sugar at night. While it is a good practice for weaning, diluting fruit juice with water does not prevent cavities.



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Besides diet modification, how can I help my child prevent tooth decay?

Brushing teeth after meals, using high-fluoride toothpaste, regular flossing, use of xylitol sweetened gum or mints and regular fluoride treatments at the dentist will help to prevent tooth decay. Children should be supervised as they brush. A good rule of thumb is that when children can dress themselves and tie their own shoes, then they are ready to brush unsupervised. Children at school should rinse their mouth with water after snacks or meals to cleanse their teeth of sugar and acid. If you purchase bottled water for daily use at home, be sure that it is fluoridated or use fluoride supplements. It is important to note that without modifying the diet, the best brushers and flossers will still get decay. And the opposite is also true- the kids with the worst oral hygiene may not get cavities if their diet is low in sugar.

I had cavities when I was young. Isn't it just part of life?

Today, many children never have a cavity in their baby teeth. You can break the cycle of childhood cavities by being sugar-conscious while weaning from breast milk or formula to other foods. A strong correlation has been found between the use of sweetened drinks as a toddler and the consumption of sugar-containing snacks in later years. You will further reinforce this "sweet-tooth" if you reward good behavior with candy or sweets. As much as possible, avoid using unhealthy snacks as a reward. With a little discipline it is possible to spare your child from a lifetime of fillings, crowns, root canals and eventual tooth loss, not to mention systemic diseases like obesity and diabetes.