



AUSTRALIAN DENTAL  
ASSOCIATION INC.

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# AUSTRALIAN DENTAL ASSOCIATION DENTAL HEALTH WEEK 2005

During Dental Health Week, 1-7 August 2005, the Australian Dental Association (ADA Inc) will be driving awareness about oral care for children and expectant mothers.

Dental decay and gum disease are costly health burdens – dental decay is the second most costly diet-related disease in Australia with an economic impact comparable with that of heart disease and diabetes (AHMAC 2001)<sup>1</sup>. Ironically, dental decay and gum disease are also some of the most preventable conditions.

Inappropriate feeding practices at all ages have an impact on our children's oral health from a decay, as well as erosion, perspective. Frequent consumption of refined carbohydrates in foods or drinks has led to an increase in the levels of decay in preschoolers and erosion in our adolescents. Nutritionally sound eating habits will benefit the teeth, the waistline and the overall health and well-being of our young Australians. Additionally, many myths around oral care for expectant mothers also contribute to compromised oral health.

The ADA Inc has developed 3 key focus areas for Dental Health Week 2005 with the intent of assisting children and expectant mothers with their oral health needs. These include:

## **REFINED CARBOHYDRATES AND DENTAL DECAY:**

The increased consumption of highly processed foods containing carbohydrates (eg sugars) and in particular, the regular snacking on these types of foods exposes teeth to an increased risk of dental disease.

Dental decay is caused by bacteria in the mouth, which changes sugar into acid. This acid then attacks teeth, leading to dental decay or what is commonly known as 'holes' in the teeth.

Typically foods that can contribute to dental decay include those high in refined carbohydrate, such as lollies, sweets, mints, throat lozenges and sugary beverages and juices. Some savoury, starchy foods like crackers and chips can also have high carbohydrate content, therefore it is important to check the food information panel on packaged foods to assist with determining foods with high carbohydrate or sugar content. While it is unrealistic to cut these foods out of the diet, the ADA Inc has some tips to help minimise dental decay related to their consumption. These include:

- Enjoy a wide variety of nutritious foods, especially those rich in calcium and low in acids and sugars
- Enjoy healthy snacks, with cheese and fruit being ideal after-school choices. Some foods assist with protecting teeth – milk and some cheeses are recognised as having protective qualities to help prevent dental decay.

## **SOFT DRINKS, FRUIT JUICES, SPORTS DRINKS AND BOTTLED WATER:**

Soft drinks often contain a significant amount of sugar – a 600ml bottle can contain the equivalent of up to 13 teaspoons of sugar, as well as high acid levels – both of which can potentially damage teeth. Some also have caffeine, which can dry the mouth.

Fruit juices contain a high level of available sugars, as well as being acidic. It is recommended that they be consumed at a mealtime.

Additionally, so-called sports drinks also have high sugar content and are quite acidic which is a recipe for dental erosion. This is particularly the case if used in conjunction with heavy exertion. Studies into regular consumption of sports drinks show that they may lead to dental decay and/or dental erosion because their acid levels have been linked to harming the tooth enamel.

High sugar and acid drinks should be limited to mealtimes in order to maintain healthy teeth and gums.

## **WATER IS THE BEST BETWEEN MEAL DRINK.**

The growing popularity of bottled water has also been linked to an increase in dental decay. A study by the Australian Research Centre for Population Oral Health indicated that children drinking non-fluoridated water found in bottled water or tank water had 52% more cavities in baby teeth than children who drank fluoridated tap water.

World wide reputable health authorities such as the World Health Organisation endorse water fluoridation stating it is extremely effective in helping to prevent dental decay and rates water fluoridation as one of the top 10 health achievements of the 20th century.

<sup>1</sup> Australian Health Ministers' Advisory Council (AHMAC) Steering Committee for National Planning of Oral Health 2001.





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The ADA says the best way for children to remain adequately hydrated and maintain healthy teeth is to drink fluoridated tap water where possible. If soft drinks, fruit juices or sports drinks are consumed the ADA recommends the following:

- Try not to hold or 'swish' the drink around the mouth as this increases the likelihood of dental decay and enamel erosion
- Use a straw where possible as this minimises exposure of the beverage to teeth
- Try to drink chilled drinks as cooler temperatures have been shown as less likely to encourage tooth erosion
- Drink fluoridated tap water as much as possible. Try to follow consumption of a fruit juice, soft drink or sports drink with a glass of water as it helps with saliva flow and helps wash away the sugars and acids from such drinks. Increased saliva flow can assist with neutralising acid from bacteria and protect teeth.

### **ORAL CARE FOR EXPECTANT MOTHERS:**

During a pregnancy it is important for the expectant mother to maintain dental visits and to inform the dentist of the pregnancy as this may impact on the type of care needed to maintain good oral health.

A number of key factors specific to pregnancy can play a role in oral health and the ADA Inc says that:

- X-rays: Dentists will usually delay any dental x-rays until after a pregnancy unless there is a pressing need. In the case that a dental x-ray is essential, the level of protection provided by the dentist and the very low exposure levels of dental x-rays will ensure safety
- Hormonal changes and gum health: Pregnant women experience hormonal changes, which can sometimes lead to gum inflammation, resulting in swelling and bleeding of the gums. It is important to make your dentist aware of any gum inflammation. Brushing regularly with a soft toothbrush and fluoridated toothpaste will assist in maintaining healthy gums and teeth.
- Morning sickness: Morning sickness can have a damaging effect on teeth as they are exposed to acids due to vomiting and gastric reflux. In order to protect teeth against this acid exposure, don't brush teeth immediately following vomiting, rather smear a small amount of fluoridated toothpaste over the teeth and rinse with water or use a fluoride mouth rinse.
- Food cravings: During pregnancy cravings can lead to snacking. The ADA Inc says that it is important to avoid high sugar snacks. Help look after teeth by eating a wide variety of foods low in sugar and high in calcium and drinking milk and fluoridated tap water where possible. Additionally, while in the womb, a baby's teeth require calcium for healthy development.
- Research has shown a strong association between gum disease in pregnant women and subsequent pre-term (premature) births and low birth-weight. It is essential that gum disease be controlled as the pregnancy progresses to minimise this effect.

During Dental Health Week 2005 the ADA Inc encourages all children and expectant mothers to focus on their specific oral care needs.

The basic principles that all people need to follow in order to help prevent dental decay include:

- Enjoy a wide variety of nutritious foods, especially those rich in calcium and low in acids and sugars
- Enjoy healthy snacks, but give your teeth a break
- Drink plenty of tap water with and between meals – especially if fluoridated
- Parents – good dental care is not pre-wired in your children – it must be taught.
- Brush gently and thoroughly with a smear of fluoride toothpaste (with a low concentration for children up to 6 years) and a soft compact head toothbrush
- Clean teeth twice a day, after breakfast and just before bed
- Have regular dental checkups – don't wait for a problem to occur
- Dental checkups start with the first birthday or within 6 months of the appearance of the first tooth
- Remember, good general health starts with good oral health

**To request additional specific media materials on each of the 3 topics outlines above, or an interview with an ADA Inc spokesperson please contact:**

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