

# Your Child's Diet

If you ask anyone what is the most important thing you can do for healthy teeth, they would say brushing them. Then they may say regular visits to the dentist. Some would also say avoid sweets and others would say drink plenty of milk. So, which one is the most important?

Most Australians are much better at cleaning their teeth than ever before. They have the best toothbrushes and flosses ever made and they have fluoride toothpaste and antiseptic mouthrinses. They may not all visit the dentist regularly, but those who do know it is important for early detection of problems.

So, why is it that some adults and children are getting decay and others aren't? Well, the answer lies in what you eat, when you eat it and how long you take to eat it. This is what is called a person's **dietary habits**.

The dietary habits include all activities that send substances past the teeth, either for a moment, such as drinking a glass of juice, for a moderate time such as eating a sandwich, or a prolonged time such as sucking on a boiled lolly. The key features of the food that can adversely affect the teeth are the amount of sugar or starch and the acidity of the food.

For example, soft drinks are very acidic. As well, many contain caffeine (see later). If you swallow one glass a day quickly, the teeth are able to cope. If you swish each mouthful around the mouth for a few seconds, you have a greater chance of harming teeth. If you drink 2 litres a day, in many small glasses, with swishing, your teeth will decay. As an adult, you may reduce the chance of decay by good brushing and flossing and using a daily antiseptic mouthrinse. But children aren't good brushers so their decay risk is higher if they drink many soft drinks, especially in their baby teeth.

As another example, if you eat a carrot, you won't get much of the carrot sticking to the teeth. Now imagine eating a sticky biscuit - you can feel the food stuck to the teeth for a long time, so there is more chance of decay.

So, how does decay happen? Sugars and starches are the favourites of some mouth bacteria. The bacteria take in the sugars and push out acid. While the sugars are there, acid is produced. When the sugar intake stops, acid stops. If the sugars are there for a long time due to a person slowly sucking a mint or throat lozenge, there is plenty of acid. If it's there for a very short time, so is the acid.



Then saliva plays an important part in watering down the acid to make it less harmful. So, if there is caffeine in the food (e.g. chocolate) or drink (cola drinks or caffeine-added 'energy' drinks), the mouth can dry up as caffeine is a diuretic (draws water out of the body). No saliva means no diluting and buffering the acids.

Drinking water should be a daily part of the dietary habits. Water is the best thirst quencher for the teeth, but drinking fluoridated tap water is known to lead to reduced decay. That's why the decay rates of 12 year-olds in Brisbane (not fluoridated) is twice that of the other Australian cities where fluoride is added to the tap water. Fluoride strengthens the outside of the tooth by making it repel acid attacks.

But, there's more. What about the acids we eat and drink? They are just as harmful if they are strong enough. Soft drinks are very acidic. Chewable Vitamin C tablets are just powdered ascorbic acid - you are just grinding powdered acid into the teeth - Vitamin C should be taken in other ways (powder in a drink or a swallowed tablet). Eating raw lemons is also very bad for teeth because lemons are very acidic.

Now take all these effects and think what they can do to a young, small child who might be exposed to these acids and sugars. That's why a person's dietary habits are so important.