

DENTAL BOOTCAMP

FactSheet

► Your Child's Diet

Diet plays an essential role in helping to keep your child's teeth healthy. While Australian children generally have good oral health, in recent times there has been an increase in the dental decay rates being experienced by children, when compared to the 1990s.

Dental erosion is a less well known cause of damage to your child's teeth, and eating and drinking acidic foods and beverages can contribute to dental erosion. The good news is that you can help prevent your child suffering from dental decay and erosion by following some healthy diet tips:

Sugars:

Typically foods that can contribute to dental decay are those high in sugar, such as concentrated fruit snack bars, sweets and lollies, muesli bars and sugary soft drinks and juices. This is because the sugar feeds the destructive bacteria in children's mouths, which then puts acid on your child's teeth. Refined foods such as savoury, starchy crackers and chips can also have high carbohydrate (sugar) content, so it is important to check the food information panel on packaged foods to assist with determining foods with high carbohydrate or sugar content.

These types of foods are high risk for decay especially if eaten often and over long periods. While it is unrealistic to completely cut these foods out, the ADA has some tips to help minimise dental decay related to eating them. These include:

- Enjoy a wide variety of nutritious foods, especially those rich in calcium and low in acids and sugars
- Enjoy healthy snacks - cheese and fruit are ideal choices. Some foods assist with protecting teeth – milk and some cheeses are recognised as having protective qualities to help prevent dental decay
- Feed your children a diet high in fresh fruits and vegetables, wholegrain cereals, lean meats and dairy products

- Limit sugary snacks such as lollies, fruit bars, muesli bars, biscuits, dried fruit, cordials, juices and soft drinks to special occasions or events
- Many healthy foods (such as fruit) contain high amounts of sugar. Starchy foods (such as bread, pasta and crackers) and milk products (including breast milk) consumed frequently can cause the growth of dental plaque, which is why you need to make sure your child's teeth are cleaned morning and night

Importantly, a healthy diet must be complemented by good oral hygiene - brushing and flossing teeth and regular dental check ups. Daily flossing and brushing greatly reduce the risk of tooth decay.

Acid:

Many beverages that are high in sugars are also acidic – that is, they can have an erosive effect on your child's teeth.

Soft drinks, sports drinks and energy drinks, along with fruit juices and cordials, often have high-acid levels, and can play a major role in the development of tooth erosion. Dental erosion is a silent epidemic. These drinks should be limited and you should encourage your child to drink fluoridated tap water as much as possible. If only bottled water is available, this is much better than drinking sugary and acidic drinks, though it's important to remember that it doesn't contain fluoride, which helps to protect and strengthen teeth against dental decay.

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Chewable Vitamin C tablets are just powdered ascorbic acid – if your child chews Vitamin C tablets they are just grinding powdered acid into the teeth. It's better for Vitamin C to be taken in other ways, such as powder in a drink or a swallowed tablet.

- The Australian Dental Association (ADA) recommends the following guidelines if consuming acidic drinks:
- Avoid holding or 'swishing' high acid drinks around the mouth as this increases the likelihood of dental decay and tooth erosion
- Use a straw when drinking soft drink and juices as much as possible to minimise the acid exposure to teeth
- If you do drink an acidic beverage, try to drink it chilled, as cooler temperatures have been shown to be less likely to cause tooth erosion
- Chewing sugar free gum can stimulate saliva flow and wash these acids away
- After drinking acidic beverages, don't brush your child's teeth right away – brushing can remove the softened tooth layer (resulting from the acidic exposure), increasing the amount of tooth loss. Wait one hour before brushing teeth. Instead of brushing, rinse with water – this will help remove any acids remaining in the mouth

Fluoride

Fluoride is a natural mineral that strengthens tooth enamel and protects against decay. Most capital cities in Australia add fluoride to the water supply at recommended levels. Your dentist can tell you if your local water supply is fluoridated. Decay rates in children tend to be higher in areas that don't have water fluoridation.

Bottled water doesn't usually contain enough fluoride to offer protection against tooth decay. Some home water filters remove fluoride from tap water. Storage-tank water does not contain fluoride. If your child drinks the majority of their water from bottled or filtered water or tanks, then talk to your dentist about your child's individual fluoride needs. If necessary, the dentist can apply 'topical' fluoride to their teeth, which has been proven to reduce childhood tooth decay.

Water – tap or bottled is always a better option than soft, sports and energy drinks, sugary juices and cordials.

