

# Oral Health Tips



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## Is Your Child Ready To Learn At School?

Tooth decay affects more children than any other chronic disease and affects their ability to learn and concentrate in school. Tooth decay occurs when bacteria found in the mouth convert sugar from foods or beverages into acid. These acids damage tooth enamel, the protective coating on the surface of the tooth. Tooth decay is an infection and can be painful if left without treatment. Tooth decay (also known as cavities or dental caries) is still one of the most preventable childhood diseases, yet it occurs five times more often than asthma and seven times more often than hay fever. Children are not healthy and not ready for school if they have poor dental health.

### Baby Teeth – They're Important

Children need their baby teeth to eat properly, talk, smile and feel good about themselves. Children with cavities may have difficulty eating, stop smiling, and have problems paying attention and learning at school. If cavities are not treated, children can become sick enough to require emergency room treatment, and their adult teeth may be permanently damaged.

### Tooth Decay Is Contagious

Tooth decay is an infectious, transmissible disease. It most frequently spreads from parents and caregivers to children. Although children are not born with decay-causing bacteria in their mouths, many unsuspecting parents (especially mothers) and caregivers pass these bacteria onto their children, but it can also be spread person to person. Once tooth decay bacteria take up residence in the mouth they convert sugars (especially sucrose) from foods and beverages into acids that attack and destroy tooth enamel producing cavities.

Tooth decay-causing bacteria are transmitted by saliva to children from parents and caregivers. These bacteria can spread easily through common behaviors such as:

- Sharing cups, water bottles, toothbrushes and utensils
- Allowing a children to put hands into parent or caregiver's mouth and then into her own mouth
- Kissing when there is saliva transfer

### Student Dental Health

Tooth decay can be prevented by selecting healthy foods and brushing and flossing every day. Follow these tips:

- Encourage healthy, well-balanced meals at home and school.

- Choose beverages for school lunches that are low in sugar and acid. Limit beverages that contain sugar (i.e., pop, juice and sports drinks) which can cause tooth decay (cavities).
- Children should floss every day. Parents should supervise their children's flossing until they can do it on their own (about age 10).
- Encourage children to help select the type of toothbrush, dental floss and fluoride toothpaste they use. Involving them will help form lasting oral health habits.
- Get regular dental checkups (frequency depends on each child's needs).
- Ask the dentist if your children would benefit from sealants, a plastic coating for the top of back teeth to help prevent decay.
- Around ages 9-10, consult with a dentist or orthodontist about if or when your children might benefit from orthodontic care (braces).
- Make sure children drink fluoridated water and use fluoride toothpaste to help prevent tooth decay. Bottled or purified water may not have enough fluoride.

### Good Snacking

Establish good eating and snack habits when your children are young. Snacks can offer important vitamins and minerals, and can play a role in healthy teeth. Some of the worst snacks are sugary or starchy snacks nibbled on for prolonged periods of time and drinks that contain sugar.

continued on next page

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## Back To School

*continued from previous page*

These snacks and drinks give bacteria in plaque a longer opportunity to make acids that cause tooth decay. Students can use the following snack guidelines to minimize the risk of promoting dental disease.

- Students should choose nutritious foods such as fresh fruits, raw vegetables, whole grains, dairy products, meat and nuts for in-between snacks. Slice up bananas, strawberries and kiwi for a colorful and tasty snack.
- Teach children to limit in-between meal sugar intake because it is used by the bacteria in plaque to form tooth decay-causing acid. When sweets are consumed, try to do so during meals. Saliva production increases during meals and helps neutralize acid production and rinses food particles from the mouth.
- Consider chewing sugarless gum after eating. Sugarless gum is another way of promoting saliva production.
- Drink water instead of any sugary drink. Water does an excellent job of rinsing the teeth, diluting the acids, and when fluoridated, can actually promote the growth and development of stronger teeth. (If you choose bottled water, check the label for fluoride content).
- Be aware that snacks from school vending machines are tempting. Check to see if your school is one of the many that now include healthier vending machine options.

### Fluoride Helps Prevent Tooth Decay

Fluoride is a naturally occurring element in the environment. In the U.S., the most common sources are fluoridated community drinking water and fluoride toothpaste. The success of water fluoridation in preventing and controlling dental caries led to the development of fluoride-containing products, including toothpaste, mouth rinse, dietary supplements, and professionally applied or prescribed gel, foam or varnish. In addition, processed beverages and foods, which constitute an increasing proportion of the diets of many U.S. residents, can contain small amounts of fluoride, especially if they are processed with fluoridated water.

Widespread use of fluoride has been a major factor in reducing tooth decay, making it less common and less severe in the U.S. over the past three decades. Fluoride works to reduce tooth decay and prevent cavities by having small amounts maintained constantly in the mouth.

*Fluoride works in three ways:*

- 1) It inhibits the loss of healthy minerals found in tooth enamel.
- 2) It can repair minor tooth decay by remineralizing areas of the tooth enamel that plaque has attacked.

Source:

American Dental Association: [www.ada.org](http://www.ada.org)  
Academy of General Dentistry: [www.agd.org](http://www.agd.org)  
Centers for Disease Control: [www.cdc.org](http://www.cdc.org)



- 3) It reduces the ability of oral bacteria to produce acid. Both adults and children can benefit from fluoride.

### Sealants Can Prevent Tooth Decay

The most likely place for tooth decay to occur is in the natural grooves on the tops of the posterior (back) teeth. Dental sealants are thin, plastic coverings that seal these grooves so that bacteria (plaque) cannot get into them. Dental sealants can last for many years but sometimes need minor repairs so that they maintain a complete seal. Because sealants act as a physical barrier to decay-causing bacteria, sealants that are maintained properly are nearly 100% effective in protecting teeth from cavities in pits and fissures. Not all children need sealants. The student's dentist will determine if the child is at risk for tooth decay and if they would benefit to have dental sealants placed on those teeth that need them.

Sealants are most often recommended for children who have newly erupted permanent teeth. First and second permanent molars erupt into a child's mouth at about six and twelve years of age. If necessary, having sealants applied to these teeth shortly after they erupt protects them from developing cavities in areas that are difficult to clean.

### Mouthguards

Children who are involved in sports should consider wearing a mouthguard. Mouthguards are an important and simple measure that can aid in the prevention of dental trauma.

- Teach children that mouthguards are priority equipment for participating in any sport that could result in a knocked-out or fractured tooth.

- Encourage children to wear mouthguards at a young age so they can get in the habit of protecting their teeth for a lifetime.
- It is equally important to wear their protective gear during practice and warm-ups.

Many things influence a child's progress and success in school, including dental health. Children must be healthy to learn, and children with tooth decay or mouth injuries may not have the attention span to concentrate on school work. Tooth decay is almost entirely preventable. By providing proper instruction, monitoring, encouragement and a positive personal example, you can help your children develop and maintain a healthy attitude about the importance of oral health.



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