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Food and Your Teeth

Eating sweets is bad for your teeth, but do you know why? Do you know that even eating 'good' foods can be bad for your teeth or that eating at certain times during the day is better than others? If you don't understand that when and what you eat can affect your teeth, then read on.

The problems all revolve around plaque, that sticky, whitish substance that covers your teeth after you eat. As you probably already know, carbohydrates break down into sugars, the fructose, maltose, glucose and lactose that fuel our bodies. We think this process happens after food leaves our mouths, while en route to our digestive tracts.

That's true for many foods, but some foods begin breaking down right in our mouths. These foods are referred to as fermentable carbohydrates. Bacteria living on your teeth use the sugars found in fermentable carbohydrates like cookies, crackers, cake, soft drinks, cereal, even bananas to produce very strong acids.

These acids can cause demineralization, a process by which the minerals inside a tooth's enamel begin to dissolve. Damaging acids are continually produced as long as these foods remain in contact with the tooth bacteria.

That's why sipping soda all afternoon is more damaging than drinking an entire can during your meal and why sticky foods (potato chips, raisins) and foods that get stuck in the crevices of molars can do more damage than foods that don't stick. Those who snack on sugary foods throughout the day also have a higher incidence of tooth decay.

Fortunately, the body can combat demineralization with a process called remineralization. Saliva facilitates the remineralization process by helping to neutralize damaging acids. Therefore, foods and sugar-free gum that help increase saliva are good choices for combating tooth decay. However, when remineralization takes place more slowly than demineralization, in other words when the process is out of balance, tooth decay may still result.

Eating disorders such as binge eating where an individual consumes large quantities of food only to purge them shortly afterwards also causes serious mineral loss because of all the stomach acids that come into the mouth during a purging session. That's why those suffering from eating disorders often experience tooth decay and demineralization.

When it comes to the teeth and your overall state of health, it's a good idea to stick with the food categories and amounts advised by the US government in its updated Food Pyramid. The 'good' foods to choose include whole grains rather than refined grains, non-citrus fruits (citrus contains a lot of acid), dark green leafy vegetables, lean proteins and calcium-rich foods and beverages.

Cheese is a good food to eat for counteracting acids and so are chicken and nuts. Milk contains lots of minerals that can enhance the remineralization process. Fruits with high water content are also good because they promote saliva. Sugar-free gum that contains xylitol is a good choice as are sugar-free hard candies.

You should limit your intake of processed foods, sugary snacks, beverages containing or mixed with sugar and alcoholic beverages. Limit in-between meal snacking, too.

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