

Dental Health

Good dental health

For good dental health, you need to look after your teeth. Despite being largely preventable, dental diseases such as dental caries (tooth decay) and dental erosion are very common health problems in Australia.

The single most important public health initiative to help fight against dental caries has been the addition of fluoride to the water supply. However, experts say that there is much more to preventive dentistry than fluoride, tooth brushing and filling cavities. Good nutrition and eating habits also play a key role in preventing dental disease, so much so, that the Australian Dental Association make certain recommendations about diet and nutrition to help reduce dental disease.

For example, the Australian Dental Association recommends having a small piece of cheese after consuming sugary food or drink, to help protect teeth and reduce the risk of dental caries.

What is dental caries?

Dental caries, or tooth decay, is a disease that results in cavities (holes) in the tooth enamel. Plaque on the surface of teeth contains bacteria which use the sugars in food and drinks to produce acid. It is this acid that dissolves the tooth strengthening minerals (calcium and phosphate) from the tooth surface.

Saliva is the body's natural defence against dental caries. It helps to wash the sugars from the mouth and reduces the effect of the acid produced by the plaque bacteria. The calcium and phosphate present in saliva also help to replace the mineral in the tooth surface.

If 'acid attacks' occur too often however, there is insufficient time for saliva to repair the damage done and eventually a hole (cavity) will develop in the tooth.

Food and dental caries

Our eating and drinking habits play an important role in the development and prevention of dental caries. With sugary food and drinks it's how much we consume, as well as how often, that affects the development of dental caries. The physical form of the sugar is also important. Solid foods are generally cleared from the mouth more slowly than drinks,

giving the plaque more time to use the sugars to produce acid. Sticky foods are particularly bad as they tend to stay in proximity to the teeth much longer.

Other carbohydrate-containing foods such as rice, potatoes, bread and fresh fruit have been shown to have a low potential for causing dental caries. Dairy foods, in particular cheese, have been shown to actually help prevent dental caries. (See below for more details)

What is dental erosion?

Dental erosion is the gradual wearing away of the hard surface of teeth which can result in increased sensitivity to temperature and sweetness. Dental erosion may be caused by exposure to acids eg. acidic foods such as soft drinks or fruit juices.

Dairy and dental health

As one of the main food groups, dairy foods are important for good nutrition during childhood and adulthood. Dairy foods such as milk, cheese and yogurt provide over 10 essential nutrients including:

- protein
- carbohydrate
- vitamins (A, B12, and riboflavin)
- minerals (calcium, phosphorus, magnesium, potassium and zinc)

In addition, dairy foods have a specific role to play in dental health. Research has shown that milk and cheese can help prevent the formation of dental caries. Dairy foods contain special anti-decay nutrients such as casein, calcium and phosphorus. Casein, a protein found in dairy foods, when combined with calcium and phosphorus, deposits a protective protein film over the enamel surface of the tooth, reducing the risk of tooth decay. The tooth strengthening minerals, calcium and phosphorus found in dairy foods also assist with the repair process after acid attacks.

Three serves of dairy foods each day, such as milk, cheese and yogurt, provide important nutrients that the body needs for health and wellbeing. In addition, this unique package of nutrients can help to protect against dental decay and erosion.



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What about flavoured milk?

Flavoured milk is thought to be more tooth friendly than many sweetened beverages (eg. cordial and soft drink) and citrus juices (eg. orange, grapefruit and pineapple juice), because it is not acidic and it contains casein, calcium and phosphorus.

Tips to help prevent dental disease

Looking after your teeth is a lifelong commitment. The following tips will help keep your teeth in tip-top condition:

- Choose tooth friendly foods and drinks such as milk, cheese or fresh fruit
- Rinse your mouth with water or milk after eating sugary food
- Eat some cheese after sugary foods or drinks – it will help to neutralise the acid produced by the plaque bacteria

- Chew sugarless gum to promote saliva production
- Go easy on very sweet and sticky foods
- Avoid frequent sipping of sugary, acidic drinks eg. soft drinks, cordials, juice and sports drinks. Where possible, drink them through a straw to lessen contact with teeth
- Young children should not be given sweetened beverages by bottle as this can increase the likelihood of tooth decay
- Encourage dental flossing, along with regular brushing after meals with a toothpaste containing fluoride
- See a dentist regularly

And consume 3 serves of dairy foods everyday to obtain the unique package of 10 essential nutrients dairy foods provide and help keep your teeth healthy.



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