

Eating habits that can harm teeth

Many parents across the country will issue a common refrain at dinner-time tonight: "You'd better eat that—it's good for you!" There's another old favorite in the parental arsenal of dietary admonitions: "Don't eat that—it'll rot your teeth!" Now more than ever, we are faced with a bewildering array of food choices, from fresh produce to sugar-laden processed convenience meals and snack foods. What we eat and when we eat it may affect not only our general health, but also our oral health.

DAILY DIET AND TOOTH DECAY

Although its rates have declined, particularly among some young children, tooth decay remains a problem for some teens and adults. That's because plaque, a sticky film of bacteria, constantly forms on our teeth. When we eat foods or drink beverages that contain sugar or starch, the bacteria produce acids that attack tooth enamel. The stickiness of plaque keeps the harmful acids against the teeth, which can contribute to tooth decay.

HARMFUL EATING HABITS

Some eating habits can wreak havoc on your body and your teeth. For example, snacking throughout the day can increase the risk of tooth decay. Sipping soda and frequent nibbling on snack foods increase the rate of harmful acid attacks on tooth enamel. And repeated binge eating—impulsive gorging or continuous eating—can do the same.

The eating disorder bulimia nervosa not only harms overall health but also is particularly destructive to teeth. It involves secret repeated binge eating followed by purging—self-induced vomiting, fasting and use of laxatives, diuretics or diet pills.

Binge eaters consume a large amount of food very quickly. Although this temporarily may ease hunger, anger, sadness or other feelings, binge eating can create stomach pain and anxiety about weight gain.

The digestive system contains strong acids that break down food. When vomiting is used to purge

food from the body, these acids attack tooth enamel. Repeated vomiting can erode tooth enamel severely. Over time, teeth exposed to stomach acids can become worn and translucent. The mouth, throat and salivary glands may become swollen and tender. Bad breath can result.

Anorexia nervosa is another serious eating disorder that is harmful to overall health and to teeth. It is characterized by an intense fear of weight gain, the desire to become thinner and an inability to maintain a minimally normal weight for height and age.

People who experience bulimia or anorexia do not receive adequate minerals, vitamins, proteins and other nutrients needed for good health. This type of "diet" takes a toll on the entire body, robbing it of the fuel it needs and causing potential injury to teeth, muscles and major organs.

KEEPING YOUR SMILE HEALTHY

To keep your smile healthy, limit snacks and eat nutritious, well-balanced meals made up of foods from the five major food groups:

- breads, cereals or other grains;
- fruits;
- vegetables;
- meat, fish, poultry or protein alternates;
- milk, yogurt or cheese.

A balanced diet includes a variety of foods that give your body all the nutrients it needs.

Brush thoroughly twice a day with fluoride toothpaste. Choose products that have the ADA Seal of Acceptance. Clean between teeth with floss or another interdental cleaner once a day to help remove plaque. And have regular dental checkups and teeth cleanings for a smile that can last a lifetime.

For more information, visit the American Dental Association's Web site at "www.ada.org" and the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Web site at "www.usda.gov/cnpp". ■

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