



DENTAL DECAY: It Matters What You Drink

In recent years, it has become well-known that what we choose to drink can impact our overall health; including our dental health. Drinking a lot of sugar-added beverages, such as pop, fruit juice, and sports drinks increases the risk for tooth decay, obesity, and other chronic diseases.

Tooth decay is the most common dental health issue, as well as the most common chronic disease. In fact, 96% of adults have had a history of cavities, while more than half of all children and teens have, or have had, a cavity. Although dental decay is mostly preventable, there are several key factors that can increase our risk: an unhealthy diet; not brushing and flossing your teeth; and not going for regular dental checkups. Unfortunately dental checkups can be costly if you don't have dental insurance.

What Is Tooth Decay?

Tooth decay can happen when sugar in our food mix with bacteria in our mouth. This combination produces a mild acid that destroys the outer layer of our teeth (i.e., enamel). This process can damage the structure of a tooth, and lead to cavities and dental erosion (a wearing of the teeth).

Not All Drinks are Created Equal

Certain drinks lead to tooth decay more than others. In fact, research shows that the more often a person drinks beverages with high-sugar content, the more the risk of cavities and erosion increases. Carbonated and acidic drinks can add to the damage as they also contribute to eroding the surface of your teeth.

Milk

Lactose (a form of sugar) is a main compound of milk, but this form of sugar is less damaging to teeth compared with other sugars. The minerals in milk are also helpful in that they act to *re-mineralize the teeth*- a process where the minerals calcium and phosphorous are returned to the structure of the tooth itself.

Chocolate Milk

It is important to note that chocolate milk contains more sugar than white milk, which can increase the risk for developing tooth decay. Yet, for reasons mentioned above, it still may be a better option than some other sugar-sweetened drinks.



Alcohol

Wine can be highly acidic and thus contribute to the risk of dental erosion. Some types of alcohol are also high in sugar content, and therefore can increase the risk for cavities.

Water

Water helps to prevent dental decay by rinsing the mouth of food and bacteria. Fluoridated water has the additional benefit of re-mineralizing the teeth, which helps to protect against dental decay and other oral diseases. Not surprisingly, the Canadian Dental Association supports “fluoridation of municipal drinking water as a safe, effective and economical means of preventing dental caries in all age groups” (2012, pg. 2).

Tips for Good Dental Health for the Entire Family:

- Reduce the amount of sugar-containing food and drinks you consume
- Use a straw when drinking sugar-added drinks so that they can be directly swallowed reducing direct contact with your teeth
- When possible, avoid screw-topped bottles, as a screw-top bottle preserves carbonation, and encourages sipping (frequent contact with the teeth)
- Brush teeth daily two times per day, morning and night, for two minutes each time with toothpaste containing fluoride, and floss daily
- Visit a dentist regularly, at least twice a year

Toddlers and Young Children

- Cow's milk and fruit juice all contain sugars, but as stated above, milk has added benefits over fruit juice.
- It is important to begin the habit of cleaning your baby's mouth before their teeth come in. Be sure to wipe the baby's teeth and gums with a clean, damp cloth after feeding.
- Children should be seen by a dentist twice a year, and an assessment visit with the dentist should occur within 6 months of them getting their first tooth or by one year of age (Canadian Dental Association, 2014).



Dentists agree that careful dental home care which includes brushing your teeth twice a day, flossing once a day), fluoride application, drinking fluorinated water, and healthy eating habits (including limiting added sugar intake) are all important for good overall health; which includes dental health. Be mindful of the drinks that you choose and provide to others. Follow the tips above to reduce the impact that added-sugar beverage choices can have on you and your family's dental health.

Key References

Canadian Dental Association. (2014). Dental care for children. Retrieved from [Canadian Dental Association- Dental Care for Children](#)

Canadian Dental Association. (2012). CDA Position on use of fluorides in caries prevention. Retrieved from [Canadian Dental Association- Use of Fluorides in Caries Prevention](#)