

3 Surprising Ways to Keep Your Teeth Healthy

Your toothbrush isn't the only weapon capable of protecting your teeth -- your diet helps too!

From [Foods that Harm, Foods that Heal](#)

In addition to brushing and flossing, a healthful diet (with natural or added fluoride) protects teeth from decay and keeps the gums healthy. Read on to discover how to keep your smile safe and strong.



Tooth decay (cavities and dental caries) and gum disease are caused by colonies of bacteria that constantly coat the teeth with a sticky film called plaque. If plaque is not brushed away, these bacteria break down the sugars and starches in foods to produce acids that wear away the tooth enamel. The plaque also hardens into tartar, which can lead to gum inflammation, or gingivitis.

A well-balanced diet provides the minerals, vitamins, and other nutrients essential for healthy teeth and gums. Fluoride, occurring naturally in foods and water, or added to the water supply, can be a powerful tool in fighting decay. It can reduce the rate of cavities by as much as 60 percent.

Dental Health Guidelines

Start right by eating right during pregnancy. Make sure that your children's teeth get off to a good start by eating sensibly during pregnancy. Particularly important is calcium, which helps to form strong teeth and bones, and vitamin D, which the body needs to absorb calcium.

You need lots of calcium for healthy teeth and gums. Low-fat dairy products, fortified soy and rice beverages, canned salmon or sardines (with bones), almonds, and dark green leafy vegetables are excellent sources of calcium.

You need vitamin D to help absorb the calcium. Vitamin D is obtained from fluid milk, fortified soy and rice beverages, margarine, fatty fish such as salmon, and moderate exposure to the sun.

Fluoride is key. To a large extent, cavities can be prevented by giving children

fluoride in the first few years of life. Fluoride is supplied through fluoridated water (not all municipalities fluoridate their water supply, however), beverages made with fluoridated water, tea, and some fish, as well as many brands of toothpaste and some mouthwash. Fluoride supplements are available for children who don't have access to fluoridated drinking water. It is wise to check to see if the water supply in your area is fluoridated. Excess consumption of fluoride can cause mottling of the teeth.

Also needed are phosphorus, magnesium, vitamin A, and beta carotene. In addition to calcium and fluoride, minerals needed for the formation of tooth enamel include phosphorus (richly supplied in meat, fish, and eggs) and magnesium (found in whole grains, spinach, and bananas). Vitamin A also helps build strong bones and teeth. Good sources of beta carotene, which the body turns into vitamin A, include orange-colored fruits and vegetables and the dark green leafy vegetables.

Children are particularly vulnerable to tooth decay; parents should:

- Provide a good diet throughout childhood
- Brush children's teeth until they're mature enough to do a thorough job by themselves (usually by 6 or 7 years old)
- Supervise twice-daily brushing and flossing thereafter
- Never put babies or toddlers to bed accompanied by a bottle of milk (which contains the natural sugar lactose), juice, or other sweet drink
- Never dip pacifiers in honey or syrup

1. The sugar factor. Sucrose, most familiar to us as granulated sugar, is the leading cause of tooth decay, but it is far from the only culprit. Although sugary foods, including cookies, candies, and sodas, are major offenders, starchy foods (such as breads and cereals) also play an important part in tooth decay. When starches mix with amylase, an enzyme in saliva, the result is an acid bath that erodes the enamel and makes teeth more susceptible to decay. If starchy foods linger in the mouth, the acid bath is prolonged, and the potential for damage is all the greater.

Be careful when eating dried fruits. Dried fruits can have an adverse effect on teeth, because they are high in sugar and cling to the teeth. Even unsweetened fruit juices can contribute to tooth decay -- they are acidic and contain relatively high levels of simple sugars.

Fresh fruits, especially apples, are better choices. Fresh fruit, although both sweet and acidic, is much less likely to cause a problem, because chewing stimulates the saliva flow. Saliva decreases mouth acidity and washes away food particles. Apples, for example, have been called nature's toothbrush because they stimulate the gums, increase saliva flow and reduce the build-up of cavity-causing bacteria. A chronically dry mouth also contributes to decay. Saliva flow

slows during sleep; going to bed without brushing the teeth is especially harmful. Certain drugs, including those used for high blood pressure, also cut down saliva flow.

2. Gum disease. More teeth are lost through gum disease than through tooth decay. Gum disease is likely to strike anyone who neglects oral hygiene or eats a poor diet. Particularly at risk are people with alcoholism, malnutrition, or AIDS/HIV infection or who are being treated with steroid drugs or certain cancer chemotherapies. Regular brushing and flossing help to prevent puffy, sore, and inflamed gums.

Gingivitis, a very common condition that causes the gums to redden, swell, and bleed, is typically caused by the gradual buildup of plaque. Treatment requires good dental hygiene and removal of plaque by a dentist or dental hygienist. Left untreated, gingivitis can lead to periodontitis -- an advanced infection of the gums that causes teeth to loosen and fall out. There may even be more serious consequences of gum disease. Studies have shown a link between poor oral health and heart disease. Bleeding gums apparently provide an entry port for bacteria or viruses that can cause heart problems. Women with tooth or gum problems are also more likely to give birth to premature babies.

Bleeding gums may also be a sign that your intake of vitamin C is deficient. Be sure that your diet includes plenty of fresh fruits and vegetables every day; munching on hard, fibrous foods, such as a celery stick or carrot, stimulates the gums.

3. Helpful foods. You can protect your teeth by concluding meals with foods that do not promote cavities and may even prevent them. For instance, aged cheeses help prevent cavities if consumed at the end of a meal. Chewing sugarless gum stimulates the flow of saliva, which decreases acid and flushes out food particles. Rinsing your mouth and brushing your teeth after eating are important strategies to prevent cavities. Here are some tips:

Consume Plenty Of

- Calcium-rich foods, such as low-fat milk, yogurt, and cheese.
- Fresh fruits and vegetables for vitamins A and C, and for chewing in order to promote healthy gums.
- Tea, which is a good source of fluoride.

Limit

- Dried fruits and other sticky foods that lodge between the teeth.

Avoid

- Sweet drinks and snacks.
- Steady sipping of acidic drinks for prolonged periods.