

How Cavities Form

Plaque begins growing on teeth as soon as they start to erupt in the mouth at about 6 months of age. Plaque is the soft yellow film that sticks to teeth. It is made up mainly of bacteria. It takes more time and effort than most of us give to keep our teeth free from plaque. When sugar combines with the plaque, an acid forms that removes calcium from the teeth. When the teeth are free of plaque and acid, the calcium in the saliva moves back into the teeth. Cavities form when the teeth lose more calcium than they take in.

Almost all food and drink contain sugar. There is sugar in dairy foods, in starch and grains, in fruits and in vegetables. It is not possible to keep sugar out of your child's diet. The natural sugars in nutritious foods can be as damaging to teeth as the sugar in candies consumed too frequently and in excess. But remember, candies contain little value for growth and development while fruits, grains, milk, etc. are essential.

How to prevent cavities:

1. Keep plaque off the teeth and gums as much as possible.

Brush at least twice a day. Use a toothpaste with fluoride. Use a soft bristle brush.

Begin to brush when your child's first tooth appears. Even before her teeth come in you should keep the mouth and gums clean. After nursing, wipe her mouth and gums using a clean, wet cloth, piece of gauze or a toothbrush. When your child begins to wash and dress himself, it is time to have him brush his own teeth. You will need to make sure he does the mouthcare routines until he is ready to accept full responsibility. If the adults in your household care for their teeth and gums, your child will learn the importance of these routines.

Children over 6 years of age should floss once a day.

Begin flossing the teeth when most baby teeth are in. By the time your child is 6 years, she should floss once a day. Just as with brushing, start early to teach your child to floss on her own. Devices are available from your dentist or drugstore to assist with flossing.

Visit a dentist twice a year.

Take your child to a dentist early. Let his first tooth remind you to see a dentist within the first year, preferably at 6 months of age. This visit is more of a training and information session for you, the parents, to discuss hygiene, feeding and diet. About 40% of 2 - 3 year olds already have some inflammation of the gums and /or cavities. Ask the dentist for advice on tooth cleaning, pacifiers, and preventing tooth injuries.

Check whether your child is getting enough fluoride.

Fluoride helps to prevent tooth decay. Water has fluoride added to it, so your child will get fluoride from swallowing water. Your child also gets fluoride from toothpaste and from topical applications from your dentist. Toothpaste with fluoride is a good way to coat the teeth and provide them with added protection. Parents sometimes hear about the dangers of too much fluoride. This is hardly ever a problem unless the water supply has too much fluoride. The correct amount is 0.7 to 1.2 parts per million. Phone your municipality and check on the water supply in your area if you are concerned.

Another way your child may get too much fluoride is by eating toothpaste. A few children tuck into the toothpaste tube regularly. Excess fluoride consumption can lead to a condition called dental fluorosis. Teach young children to use a pea-size amount of toothpaste for brushing - and never for snacking!

Ask the dentist to apply sealants to the chewing surfaces of permanent back teeth when they come in.

A dental sealant is a plastic coating that can be etched to a tooth's biting surface. It seals out food and plaque much better than fluoride. Surveys show that 4 out of 5 cavities in children are in these chewing teeth. Sealants are painless to apply and last for several years.

2. Chewing, food tastes and stimulation gets saliva to flow. This saliva bathes the teeth and helps remove the acid. Calcium then returns to the teeth causing some repair. Eating full meals or chewing sugarless gum or mints increases the amount of saliva in the mouth.

It is not only what children eat and drink but how often they eat and drink that helps cavities form.

Children who snack or drink often are bathing their teeth in acid most of the day. As well, very little saliva flows into the mouth. The acid remains on the teeth longer and attacks the teeth. Eat full healthy meals. Limit snacking as much as possible.

Most people think that sugar is the main cause of cavities. In fact, some types of cooked starch do just as much harm and cling to the teeth for much longer.

The starches in foods like bread, cereals, crackers, pasta and potato chips coat and cling onto the teeth. It is best to have these foods only at mealtimes when the other foods and drinks will help clear them from the teeth. Parents often give young children crackers for a snack because they have more food value than chips or candies. Do not give your children crackers to keep them quiet or busy. They are not good for the teeth. In the same way, using the bottle or sippy cup as a pacifier, can promote cavities.

The best snack choices:

- Cheese, preferably lower fat, is a good choice. Cheese makes saliva form. Saliva clears and acts against the harmful acids in foods.
- Studies show that cashews and peanuts fight plaque and the bacteria that cause tooth decay. Be careful about giving nuts or small hard round pieces of fruit or vegetables to young children. Children can choke very easily. The risk of choking is greatest with children under four years of age.
- Raw fruit and vegetables are a healthy choice but do contain sugar. If you want to give your child a sweet treat, plain dark chocolate does the least damage. It dissolves and clears from the mouth quickly.

3. Don't neglect the care of the baby teeth.

Preventing cavities in the baby teeth is very important. These teeth guide the permanent teeth into place. If the back baby teeth are lost early, the permanent teeth may be out of position when they come in. The dentist or orthodontist may need to correct this in the future.

All children can grow up to be cavity-free with good dental care. At Children's & Women's Health Centre of British Columbia we believe parents are partners on the health care team. We want you to be as informed as possible. This brochure will answer some of your questions. Please ask about things you do not understand and share your concerns.

If you have any questions, please call 604-875-2345, local 7070

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4480 Oak Street
Vancouver, B.C. V6H 3V4
604-875-2345
www.bcchildrens.ca