

Fact Sheet

This information was compiled for you by the Academy of General Dentistry. Your dentist cares about long-term dental health for you and your family and demonstrates that concern by belonging to the Academy of General Dentistry. As one of the 37,000 general dentists in the United States and Canada who are members of the Academy, your dentist participates in an ongoing program of professional development and continuing education to remain current with advances in the profession and to provide quality patient treatment.

You have permission to photocopy this page and distribute it to your patients.

Nutrition & Oral Health

You may be able to prevent two of the most common diseases of modern civilization—tooth decay (caries) and periodontal disease—simply by improving your diet. Decay results when the hard tissues are destroyed by acid products from oral bacteria. Certain foods and food combinations are linked to higher levels of cavity-causing bacteria. Although poor nutrition does not directly cause periodontal disease, many researchers believe that the disease progresses faster and is more severe in patients whose diet does not supply the necessary nutrients. Periodontal disease affects the supporting tissues of the teeth and is the leading cause of tooth loss in adults.

Poor nutrition affects the entire immune system, thereby increasing susceptibility to many disorders. People with lowered immune systems have been shown to be at higher risk for periodontal disease. Additionally, today's research shows a link between oral health and systemic conditions, such as diabetes and cardiovascular disease. So, eating a variety of foods as part of a well-balanced diet may not only improve your dental health, but increasing fiber and vitamin intake may reduce the risk for other diseases.

How can I plan my meals and snacks to promote better oral health?

Eat a well-balanced diet characterized by moderation and variety. Develop eating habits that follow the recommendations from reputable health organizations such as the American Dietetic Association and the National Institutes of Health. Choose foods from the five basic

food groups, as defined by the U.S. Department of Agriculture: fruits; vegetables; breads and cereals; milk and dairy products; and meat, chicken, fish, eggs, nuts or beans. Avoid fad diets that limit or eliminate entire food groups, which usually result in vitamin or mineral deficiencies.

Always keep your mouth moist by drinking lots of water. Saliva protects both hard and soft oral tissues. If you have a dry mouth, supplement your diet with sugarless candy or gum to stimulate saliva.

Two important factors affecting tooth decay are:

1. How much you eat: Malnutrition (bad nutrition) can result from too much nourishment as easily as too little. Each time you eat, you create an environment for oral bacteria to develop. Additionally, studies are showing that dental disease is just as related to overeating as heart disease, obesity, diabetes and hypertension. So, making a habit of eating too much of just about anything, too frequently, should be avoided.

2. And, how often you eat: Foods that cling to your teeth promote tooth decay. Every time you eat foods containing carbohydrates—such as candy, cookies, breads, pasta, potatoes and even corn—acid attacks your teeth for at least 20 minutes. Instead, choose dentally healthy foods such as nuts, raw vegetables, plain yogurt, cheese and sugarless gum or candy.

When you eat fermentable carbohydrates, such as crackers, cookies and chips, eat them as part of your meal, instead of by themselves. These foods do not dissolve in saliva and clear the mouth until they have been broken down into simpler sugars. The process is likely to take hours and extends the time bacteria attack the enamel of your teeth. Combinations of foods

neutralize acids in the mouth and inhibit tooth decay. For example, enjoy cheese with your crackers. Cheese and other dairy products can be anti-cariogenic due to their buffering effect. They help neutralize acids in the mouth. Your snack will be just as satisfying and better for your dental health.

Why do I need fluoride?

Fluoride is a compound of the element fluorine, which is found universally throughout nature in water, soil, air and in most foods. Existing abundantly in living tissue as an ion, fluoride is absorbed easily into tooth enamel, especially in children's growing teeth. Once teeth are developed, fluoride makes the entire tooth structure more resistant to decay and promotes remineralization, which aids in repairing early decay before the damage is even visible. Drinking excessively fluoridated water can cause dental fluorosis, a harmless cosmetic discoloring or mottling of the enamel, visible by chalky white specks and lines or pitted and brown stained enamel on developing teeth.

When should I consult my dentist or dietitian about my nutritional status?

Always ask your dentist if you're not sure how your nutrition (diet) may affect your oral health. Conditions such as tooth loss, pain, or joint dysfunction can impair chewing and are often found in elderly people, those on restrictive diets and those who are undergoing medical treatment. People experiencing these problems may be too isolated or weakened to eat nutritionally balanced meals at a time when it is particularly critical. Talk to your dental health professional about what you can do for yourself or someone you know in these circumstances.

To find a dentist, please call
1.877.2X.A.YEAR
(1.877.292.9327).

To access this and other health resources,
go to the consumer section at
www.agd.org.