

Snack Smart for Healthy Teeth

Contributed by National Institute of Dental and Craniofacial Research

By
National Institute of Dental
and Craniofacial Research

What's wrong with sugary snacks, anyway?

Sugary snacks taste so good-but they aren't so good for your teeth or your body. The candies, cakes, cookies, and other sugary foods that kids love to eat between meals can cause tooth decay. Some sugary foods have a lot of fat in them too. Kids who consume sugary snacks eat many different kinds of sugar every day, including table sugar (sucrose) and corn sweeteners (fructose). Starchy snacks can also break down into sugars once they're in your mouth.

Did you know that the average American eats about 147 pounds of sugars a year? That's a big pile of sugar! No wonder the average 17-year-old in this country has more than three decayed teeth!

How do sugars attack your teeth?

Invisible germs called bacteria live in your mouth all the time. Some of these bacteria form a sticky material called plaque on the surface of the

teeth. When you put sugar in your mouth, the bacteria in the plaque gobble up the sweet stuff and turn it into acids. These acids are powerful enough to dissolve the hard enamel that covers your teeth. That's how cavities get started. If you don't eat much sugar, the bacteria can't produce as much of the acid that eats away enamel.

How can I "snack smart" to protect myself from tooth decay?

Before you start munching on a snack, ask yourself what's in the food you've chosen. Is it loaded with sugar? If it is, think again. Another choice would be better for your teeth. And keep in mind that certain kinds of sweets can do more damage than others. Goey or chewy sweets spend more time sticking to the surface of your teeth. Because sticky snacks stay in your mouth longer than foods that you quickly chew and swallow, they give your teeth a longer sugar bath.

You should also think about when and how often you eat snacks. Do you nibble on sugary snacks many times throughout the day, or do you usually just have dessert after dinner? Damaging acids form in your mouth every time you eat a sugary snack. The acids continue to affect your teeth for at least 20 minutes before they are neutralized and can't do any more harm. So, the more times you eat sugary snacks during the day, the more often you feed bacteria the fuel they need to cause tooth decay. If you eat sweets, it's best to eat them as dessert after a main meal instead of several times a day between meals. Whenever you eat sweets -- in any meal or snack -- brush your teeth well with a fluoride toothpaste afterward.

When you're deciding about snacks, think about:

the number
of times a day you eat sugary snacks
how long
the sugary food stays in your mouth
the
texture of the sugary food (chewy? sticky?)

If you snack after school, before bedtime, or other times during the day, choose something without a lot of sugar or fat. There are lots of tasty, filling snacks that are less harmful to your teeth -- and the rest of your body -- than foods loaded with sugars and low in nutritional value. Snack smart! Low-fat choices like raw vegetables, fresh fruits, or whole-grain crackers or bread are smart choices. Eating the right foods can help protect you from tooth decay and other diseases. Next time you reach for a snack, pick a food from the list inside or make up your own menu of non-sugary, low-fat snack foods from the basic food groups.

Snack Smart Food List

Pick a variety of foods from these groups:

Fresh fruits and raw vegetables

berries
oranges
grapefruit

melons
pineapple
pears
tangerines

broccoli
celery
carrots
cucumbers
tomatoes
unsweetened
fruit and vegetable juices
canned
fruits in natural juices

Grains

bread
plain
bagels
unsweetened
cereals
unbuttered
popcorn
tortilla
chips (baked, not fried)
pretzels
(low-salt)
pasta
plain
crackers

Milk and dairy products

low or
non-fat milk
low or
non-fat yogurt
low or
non-fat cheeses
low or
non-fat cottage cheese

Meat, nuts and seeds

chicken
turkey
sliced
meats
pumpkin
seeds
sunflower
seeds
nuts

Others (these snacks combine foods from the different groups)

pizza
tacos

Remember to

choose sugary foods less often

avoid sweets between meals

eat a variety of low or non-fat
foods from the basic groups
brush your teeth with fluoride
toothpaste after snacks and meals

Note to Parents

The foods listed in this leaflet have not all been tested for their decay-causing potential. However, knowledge to date indicates that they are less likely to promote tooth decay than are some of the heavily sugared foods children often eat between meals. Candy bars aren't the only culprits. Foods such as pizza, breads, and hamburger buns may also contain sugars. Check the label. The new food labels identify sugars and fats on the Nutrition Facts panel on the package. Keep in mind that brown sugar, honey, molasses, and syrups also react with bacteria to produce acids, just as refined table sugar does. These foods also are potentially damaging to teeth.

Your child's meals and snacks should include a variety of foods from the basic food groups, including fruits and vegetables; grains, including breads and cereals; milk and dairy products; and meat, nuts, and seeds. Some snack foods have greater nutritional value than others and will better promote your child's growth and development. However, be aware that even some fresh fruits, if eaten in excess, may promote tooth decay. Children should brush their teeth with fluoride toothpaste after snacks and meals. (So should you!)

Please note: These general recommendations may need to be adapted for

children on special diets because of diseases or conditions that interfere with normal nutrition.

For more information please visit: www.nidcr.nih.gov/OralHealth