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PATIENT

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TOOTH DECAY

What causes tooth decay?

Tooth decay, also known as caries or cavities, is an oral disease that affects many people. Natural bacteria live in your mouth and form plaque. The plaque interacts with deposits left on your teeth from sugary and starchy foods and produces acids. These acids damage tooth enamel over time by dissolving, or demineralizing enamel, which weakens the teeth and leads to tooth decay. Tooth decay is not life threatening and is highly preventable.

What types of foods may contribute to tooth decay?

Foods containing carbohydrates (starches and sugars), such as soda pop, candy, ice cream, milk, and cake, and even some fruits, vegetables, and juices, may contribute to tooth decay.

How can cavities be prevented?

The acids formed by plaque can be counteracted by the saliva in your mouth, which acts as a buffer and remineralizing agent. Dentists often recommend chewing sugarless gum to stimulate saliva flow. However, the best way to prevent cavities is to brush and floss regularly. Fluoride, a natural substance that helps to remineralize the tooth structure, makes the tooth more resistant to the acids and helps to correct damage produced by the plaque bacteria. Fluoride is added to toothpaste and water sources to help fight cavities. Your dentist also may recommend that you use special high concentration fluoride gels, mouth rinses, or dietary fluoride supplements. In addition, professional strength anti-cavity varnish or sealants may be recommended.

Who is at risk for cavities?

Because we all carry bacteria in our mouths, everyone is at risk for cavities. Those with a diet high in carbohydrates and sugary foods and those who live in communities without fluoridated water are likely candidates for cavities. Also, those with a lot of fillings have a higher chance of developing tooth decay because the area around the restored portion of a tooth is a good breeding ground for bacteria. In general, children and senior citizens are the two groups at the highest risk for cavities.

What can I do to help protect my teeth?

The best way to combat cavities is to follow three simple steps:

- Cut down on sweets and between-meal snacks. Remember, sugary and starchy foods put your teeth at risk.
- Brush after every meal and floss daily. Cavities most often begin in hard-to-clean areas between the teeth and in the fissures and pits on the biting surfaces of the teeth. Hold the toothbrush at a 45-degree angle and brush inside, outside, on top of, and in between your teeth. Replace your toothbrush every few months. Only buy toothpastes and rinses that contain fluoride.
- See your dentist at least every six months for checkups and professional cleanings. Because cavities can be difficult to detect, a thorough dental examination is very important. If left untreated, cavities can lead to permanent loss of the tooth structure, root canal therapy, and even loss of the tooth.

For more information, talk with your general dentist.

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