Protecting your teeth from decay

What causes tooth decay?

After eating and drinking, food particles are inevitably left in the mouth and on the surface of your teeth. The bacteria in your mouth devour the food and a byproduct of their feast is acid, which can eat a hole or cavity-in the tooth's enamel. Left untreated the cavity can cause considerable pain, and destroy the dentin, pulp and the tooth's nerve. Thus, diet and nutrition play a major role in oral health and the incidence of tooth decay.

What foods cause cavities?

Many kinds of food can cause cavities. Foods high in sugar, starch and carbohydrates are particularly problematic because they provide the bacteria with a high-energy source. Also, sticky foods, such as raisins, caramel and honey, adhere to tooth surfaces and are a favorite of bacteria because it is a lasting food source.

Diet plays a major role in the prevention of tooth decay. Increased consumption of poor food choices increases the chances for tooth decay. For example, according to the Department of Nutrition and Food Studies, soda consumption has increased from 22.2 gallons of cola per person per year in 1970 to more than 53 gallons per person per year in 2000.

Do certain foods help prevent cavities?

Some research says certain foods, such as peanuts or sugar-free chewing gum, may be "friendly" to teeth. Eating these foods along with or after foods that contain carbohydrates may help to counter the effects of acids produced by bacteria. Drinking plenty of water can help wash away food particles. Of course, dentists encourage their patients to eschew these sugary snacks in favor of healthy alternatives, such as fruit.

How can I avoid cavities?

Regular brushing, flossing and dental check-ups can significantly reduce the chances of tooth decay. Dentists recommend that people brush their teeth at least twice a day for two to four minutes each time. Brushing removes bacteria as well as the food debris bacteria thrive on. You should follow brushing with flossing, which reaches areas of your mouth your toothbrush cannot.

Drink plenty of fluoridated water and brush with a toothpaste containing fluoride. Fluoride strengthens enamel. Beware of bottled water, however, because some companies do not fluoridate their product. If the water supply in your community is not fluoridated, see your dentist about fluoride treatments.

What else can I do to prevent cavities?

When you eat meals or snacks containing sugars or carbohydrates, follow the meal with water to help wash off food particles remaining on teeth.

Keep a toothbrush and toothpaste handy; children can keep travel-size products in lockers or back packs and adults should keep a spare pair at work. Chew sugarless gum, (with or without xylitol) after meals or snacks when unable to brush. Drink water throughout the day to help cleanse teeth of excess bacteria and food debris, and keep the mouth hydrated.

One way to help prevent cavities is to limit the amount of foods that contain sugars avoid between-meal snacks when possible. If you do eat foods that contain sugars, eat them during meals. Saliva production increases during a meal and helps to neutralize acid production and rinse food particles from the mouth.

Finally, see your dentist at least twice a year. Your dentist can catch minor problems before they become major ones. Your dentist can give you tips on foods to avoid and how to keep your mouth healthy. Also, dentists can inform you of medications that may cause dry mouth, which makes your teeth more susceptible to decay.