

Dental health

Good dental hygiene is important for all Australians, regardless of age. Dental diseases such as tooth decay and dental erosion are common health problems, and they are largely preventable.

A key factor in helping to fight tooth decay (also called dental caries) has been the addition of fluoride to the water supply. Brushing teeth regularly, using fluoride toothpaste, flossing teeth, having good mouth saliva, and the types of foods and beverages consumed in the whole diet all play a role.

What is the cause of tooth decay?

Tooth decay is caused by the bacteria that are normally present in the mouth. These organisms form a sticky, colourless, soft film on the teeth called "plaque". Plaque builds up naturally on clean teeth even when no food present. However, the presence of food increases the formation of plaque which will continually build up on teeth unless it is flossed or brushed away¹.

Food and drink and tooth decay

Good nutrition and eating habits play a key role in preventing tooth decay and dental erosion. With sugar sweetened food and drinks, it's how much we consume, as well as how often, that affects the development of tooth decay.

The amount, as well as the physical form of the carbohydrate/sugar, is also important.

Solid foods are cleared from the mouth more slowly than liquid, giving the plaque more time to produce acid. Sticky foods are particularly bad as they tend to stay in close contact with teeth much longer.

Provided that good dental hygiene practices are maintained, sugar-sweetened drinks can be enjoyed on occasion.

Other carbohydrate-containing foods such as rice, potatoes, bread and fresh fruit are unlikely to cause tooth decay.

Dairy foods, particularly cheese, help prevent tooth decay.

Will Drinking Soft Drinks Erode my Teeth?

This concern arose from demonstrations depicting a tooth which has eroded after being immersed in a soft drink for several days.

Food acids in drinks can dissolve some of the tooth enamel but under normal circumstances, teeth would not be in constant contact with a beverage.

Saliva also helps to neutralise the acid and reduce its effects on enamel. The minerals in saliva (calcium, phosphorus and fluoride) enhance remineralisation of the enamel¹.

The Australian Beverages Council supports the need for further dental research and educational programs to clarify the facts about tooth decay, erosion, and good dental health.

Fast facts

Tips to help prevent dental disease ¹

- See a dentist for a check-up at least once a year.
- Always use a fluoridated toothpaste
- Drink water that contains fluoride at a level that helps to protect against tooth decay.
- Offer children milk or water – the only recommended drinks for children.
- Choose healthy snacks such as fresh fruit, vegetable sticks, yoghurt or cheese.
- Eat a small amount of hard cheese after meals to help protect teeth from dental decay.
- Limit the time you hold a sugar-sweetened drink in your mouth and limit constant sipping. Drink rather than sip.
- Limit intake of sugar-sweetened and/or acidic drinks and foods. Drink them with meals.
- Use a sugar-free chewing gum after eating or drinking as it can stimulate saliva, increasing the clearance of sugars and other fermentable carbohydrates from the teeth.

For more information

[Nutrition Australia Dental Health](#)