







How does fluoride help?

Fluoride may be found in most toothpastes and some mouthwashes. It helps to reduce decay by making the tooth surface tougher and less prone to acid attacks. It does this by replacing some of the molecules in the enamel or dentine. The fluoride then "clings on" to the calcium in the tooth so that the acid can't dissolve it as easily. When we have fluoride in toothpaste or mouthwash, it makes the surface of the tooth more resistant to decay. If we have it when our teeth are forming (that is, from before birth until early teens), then it makes the tooth tougher all the way through. That is why dentists would like to see fluoride in the water supply.



So what should we do?

There are several ways in which we can reduce our experience of decay. These include :

-  **Only have sugar at meals :**
Don't snack on sugary snacks between meals, try fresh fruit or cheese. Cut out sugar in your brews, or use sweeteners. Avoid soft drinks containing sugar, stick to diet pop, fresh juice or water.
-  **Keep your teeth clean :**
Effective brushing at least twice a day will go a long way towards reducing decay. Clean difficult to reach areas like between the teeth with floss.
-  **Use a fluoride toothpaste :**
If your kids are young, ask your dentist about fluoride supplements. People who wear fixed braces should use a fluoride mouthwash.
-  **Visit your dentist regularly :**
We can spot any decay when it is quite small and easy to restore. We can also help with advice on cleaning, special brushes etc.
-  **Never eat or drink sugary stuff in bed at night :**
Be especially careful about what you put in babies' bottles and feeder cups.
-  **Chew sugar-free gum :**
Chew after meals and snacks. Just be careful with gum and small children as they can choke on it. Chew your gum for a good ten minutes.



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What is decay?

Decay, or caries, as the dentists call it, is one of the commonest diseases in Western society. It affects everyone causing much pain and suffering, yet it is entirely preventable. The rate of dental decay fell steadily during the sixties and seventies due to the introduction of fluoride toothpastes, but has levelled off in the nineties and may even be on the rise again in certain areas.

Decay is essentially the disease process which results in the loss of tooth substance ("holes in the teeth"). If this is not too severe, the dentist can drill out the diseased tooth substance and replace it with a filling. If the tooth substance loss is more severe, more complex restoration may be necessary.

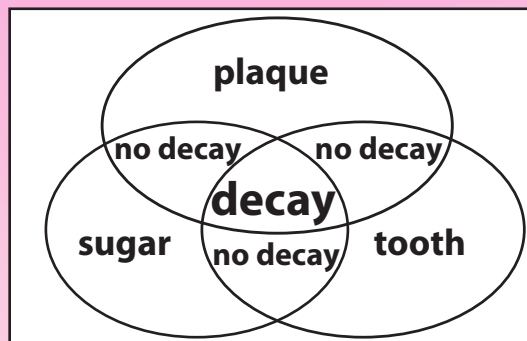


Where does decay strike?

Decay tends to strike first at those places where plaque gathers. These include in between the teeth, in the grooves on the back teeth, around the gum and pretty much anywhere on dirty teeth. Decay is almost always bigger underneath than it looks from the surface, so if you think you can see a hole starting, get it sorted right away.

How does decay happen?

Plaque, the sticky white substance that forms on your teeth between meals, contains a mixture of bacteria. These feed on sugar in your diet and the main waste product they produce is acid. This dissolves the calcium out of your teeth, leaving a soft hole instead of sound tooth. So essentially, we need three things for decay to happen: tooth surface, plaque and sugar. We can represent this in a diagram :



It can then be seen that all three factors must be present for decay to occur. Frequent brushing does reduce decay, but plaque forms within twenty seconds of brushing, so it's not really possible to be completely plaque-free all the time. Reducing sugar in our diets will also reduce decay.



How long does an acid attack last?

We do have one ally in the battle against decay, our own saliva. In about twenty minutes our saliva can neutralise the acid formed by an acid attack. It means that every time you have sugar, your teeth are harmed for about twenty minutes.

It therefore makes good sense to keep the number of acid attacks to a minimum, so if you are going to have some sugar, then have it all in one go. "Drip-feeding" is the worst thing you can do. That's why sugary drinks cause so much damage, we tend to trickle them through out teeth over a long period of time.

Chewing sugar-free gum reduces the neutralising time to about 5 minutes, so if you eat or drink something containing sugar, chew some sugar free gum afterwards.

When you're asleep, your saliva flow rate reduces. Therefore, some sugar taken last thing at night could cause an acid attack lasting for hours. This is why sugary drinks in babies' bottles are so destructive, and why it's so important to brush your teeth before going to bed for the night.

