

# clips on sugars

FOR UP-TO-DATE INFORMATION ON SUGARS IN HEALTHY EATING

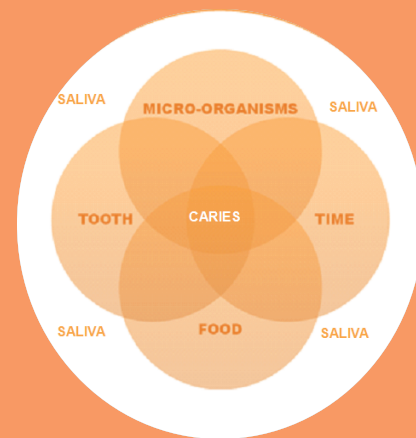
## Healthy Teeth for a Healthy You!

Healthy teeth give you a great smile and are important for your health and well-being. A number of factors affect the health of your teeth including eating habits, fluoride use, dental care, genetics, and even your general health. Tooth decay (also called cavities or dental caries) is a common concern in children, but it can affect people of all ages. The good news is that you can prevent tooth decay!

### WHAT CAUSES TOOTH DECAY?

The bacteria naturally found in your mouth form a sticky film called plaque. The plaque bacteria make acids using carbohydrates (sugars and starches) from foods that aren't cleaned from your teeth. The acids from the plaque attack the outer layer of the tooth (called the enamel) to cause tiny holes in the enamel, or cavities.

The acid attack can continue for 20-30 minutes after eating, or longer if food is trapped between the teeth. But the acid can be neutralized by saliva – the protective fluid in your mouth. Saliva also helps to clear food particles from the mouth and add minerals to the tooth's enamel. The risk of tooth decay increases when there is a short time between meals and snacks or when food stays in the mouth for a long time. In this case, saliva is less able to protect the teeth and rebuild the enamel.



### PREVENTING CAVITIES

Regular brushing and flossing can help to prevent tooth decay by reducing plaque build up and removing leftover food particles from your teeth. Fluoride can help stop the bacteria from making harmful acids and protect your teeth from acid attacks. It can also help repair damage to teeth caused by acids, making them stronger. Of course, don't forget to make regular visits to your dentist and dental hygienist to prevent dental caries.

#### Three Steps to a Great Smile

**Floss!** Flossing helps remove food and plaque build-up from between teeth, where a toothbrush cannot reach. In fact, without flossing, you are missing more than one third of the tooth's surface! The Canadian Dental Hygienists Association suggests flossing at least once a day.

**Brush!** Brushing teeth removes plaque and bacteria that cause caries. Brushing should follow flossing and should last for two to three minutes. Brush your teeth at least twice per day (especially before bedtime), and don't forget to brush your tongue! Be sure to replace your toothbrush every 3 months or sooner if the bristles become flattened.

**Use Fluoride!** About 45% of Canadians receive fluoride in their tap water<sup>1</sup>. It is also found in products such as toothpaste and mouthwash. Too much fluoride can lead to dental fluorosis (white spots on the teeth), especially in children. Children under six should be supervised while brushing, should only use a pea-sized amount of toothpaste, and should not swallow toothpaste. Children under three should have their teeth brushed by an adult, without using toothpaste.

<sup>1</sup> Health Canada, *Fluoride and human health*, online. Ottawa: Health Canada, 2002, updated 2010. Available: <http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/hl-vs/iyh-vsv/environ/fluor-eng.php>

## THE ROLE OF CARBOHYDRATES (SUGARS AND STARCHES)

The sugar in sweet foods is most often singled out as the cause of cavities, but all carbohydrates can contribute to tooth decay, including starchy foods like bread and crackers. The breakdown of starch into sugars begins in the mouth and the bacteria can feed on these sugars to form acids. The total amount of carbohydrates (sugars and starches) that you eat is not as important in preventing cavities as how often you eat them and how long they are in your mouth.

Eating a wide variety of carbohydrate foods, including fruits, vegetables, cereals, breads, and milk products is important to healthy eating, so cutting back on carbohydrates is not the answer. However, the more often you eat, the more often your teeth are exposed to sugars and starches, and the greater the risk of tooth decay. Frequent snacking on carbohydrate foods and sipping of beverages containing sugars increases the amount of time they are in contact with your teeth. By spacing meals and snacks at least 2 hours apart, you may lower your risk of tooth decay.

Eating carbohydrate foods that stick to your teeth or clear your mouth slowly also expose the teeth to carbohydrate for longer periods. This can include cooked starches found in crackers, cookies, cereals, pasta, rice, potato chips, and pretzels, as well as foods that are mostly sugars such as dried fruits and candies. Sugars in fruit juices, fruit drinks, soft drinks, and sports drinks are generally less cavity-causing because they move through the mouth more quickly, unless they are sipped over a long period of time.



## SENSIBLE SNACKING

These tips will help children get the energy and nutrients they need while keeping their teeth healthy:

- Eat a wide variety of foods each day from Canada's Food Guide.
- Encourage three snacks a day instead of all-day nibbling and frequent sipping of carbohydrate-containing food and drinks.
- Save sticky foods for mealtimes when children can brush their teeth afterwards.
- Offer a variety of snacks (e.g., apples and raw carrots can help to clean food particles from the mouth).
- Have children rinse their mouths with water after snacking when brushing is not possible.

## BABIES CAN GET CAVITIES TOO!

Early childhood caries is a form of tooth decay that affects infants and toddlers (up to 4 years of age). Early childhood caries are typically found on the visible part of the front teeth. This can lead to loss of baby teeth, crowded or crooked adult teeth, and speech problems. The causes of early childhood caries are complex, but relate mainly to regular exposure of a child's teeth for long periods of time to bottles or cups of formula, milk, or juice.

Use these tips to help prevent early childhood caries:

- Begin brushing your child's teeth after each feeding as soon as your child has teeth.
- Avoid giving your child pacifiers dipped in syrups or sugary liquids.
- If your child takes a bottle to bed, fill it with water rather than juice, milk, or formula.

Taking care of your teeth is an important step on the road to good health. You can help prevent tooth decay with regular brushing, flossing, and the use of fluoride. Carbohydrate foods are part of a healthy diet, but be careful how often and how long these foods are in your mouth, especially sticky foods. Finally, regular visits to your dentist and dental hygienist will help keep your teeth and gums healthy!

## MINI-QUIZ

Now it's time to test your dental care knowledge! Simply answer true or false to the following statements:

1. All carbohydrates, both sugars and starches, can lead to tooth decay.
2. Saliva helps to protect teeth.
3. Infants can have tooth decay.
4. Regular brushing and flossing help to prevent cavities.

Mini-Quiz answers: They are all true.

This fact sheet, developed with the collaboration of Registered Dietitians and Nutrition Researchers, is published by the Canadian Sugar Institute. For additional copies of this resource, please contact:

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