Fact Sheet – Diet and dental decay

This fact sheet has been developed by a health promotion specialist in Gloucestershire after discussion with HENRY about the rising incidence of tooth decay in the under 5’s. The information below contains the results of the most up to date research.

Every time you eat or drink anything sugary, your teeth are under attack from the harmful acids produced when sugar reacts with the bacteria in plaque (the sticky white coating on your teeth). So it is important to have sugary foods or drinks at mealtimes only, reducing the amount of time your teeth are at risk.

Limiting the amount and frequency of sugar intake is important to prevent dental decay, but has wider health benefits such as reducing overweight and obesity. Overweight and obesity increases the risk of heart disease and type 2 diabetes.

Most of the sugars we eat are in processed foods, such as cakes, biscuits, and chocolate, sugary cereals, jams, fizzy drinks, milk shakes, squashes etc. There are also many hidden sugars in many savoury foods such as pasta sauces, soups, baked beans, ketchups and sauces.

However, it is important to note that honey, fruit smoothies, fruit juice and dried fruit all contain naturally occurring sugars which may cause dental decay if eaten as snacks between meals. The sugars found naturally in whole fruit are not likely to cause tooth decay, because the sugars are contained within the structure of the fruit. But when fruit is juiced or blended, the sugars are released. Once released, these sugars can damage teeth, especially if fruit juice is drunk frequently. When fruit is dried, this process releases some sugars. Dried fruit also becomes sticky and therefore has a tendency to stick to teeth. (1)

To reduce the risk of developing dental decay it is best to limit processed sugary foods and drinks, and if taken they should be consumed as part of a meal in line with the ‘eatwell plate’ guidance. Whilst foods containing naturally occurring sugars may have some nutritional benefit, they can cause dental decay if eaten between meals (with the exception of whole fruits, vegetables and milk). Therefore these foods which include: honey, natural syrups, fruit smoothies, fruit juice, fruit juice concentrate and dried fruits should also be taken at meal times and not as a snack.

Suitable snacks for young children include: starchy foods such as breadsticks, bread, pitta bread, toast, and crackers with cheese spread or cheese, mini rolls filled with egg, cheese, or lean meats such as ham or chicken, fresh fruit or raw vegetables with dips, such as hummus, yoghurt or cottage cheese. Ensure that starchy products have a low salt content. Only milk or water should be consumed as a drink between meals. If juice is taken it should be diluted with water 50/50 and taken at mealtimes in a free flow or open cup. Juice given in a bottle can cause rapid tooth decay in the front teeth, which spreads rapidly to other teeth.


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