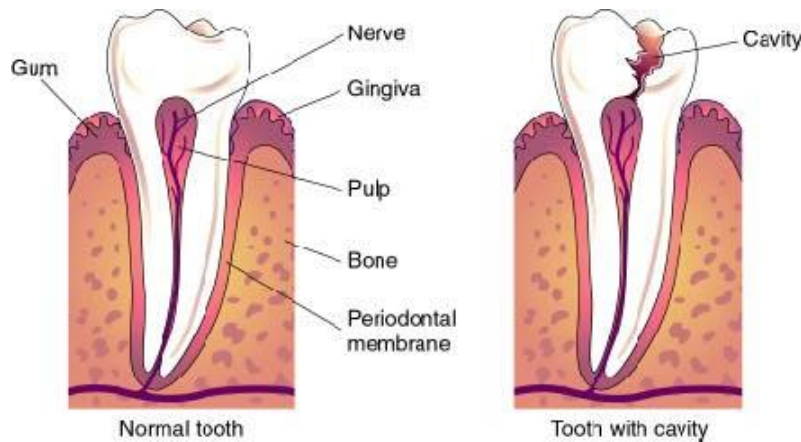




Tooth Decay (Cavities)

Tooth decay is the destruction of your tooth enamel, the hard, outer layer of your teeth. It can be a problem for children, teens and adults. Plaque, a sticky film of bacteria, constantly forms on your teeth. When you eat or drink foods containing sugars, the bacteria in plaque produce acids that attack tooth enamel. The stickiness of the plaque keeps these acids in contact with your teeth and over time the enamel can break down. This is when cavities can form. A cavity is a little hole in your tooth.



Cavities are more common among children, but changes that occur with aging make cavities an adult problem, too. Recession of the gums away from the teeth, combined with an increased incidence of gum disease, can expose tooth roots to plaque. Tooth roots are covered with cementum, a softer tissue than enamel. They are susceptible to decay and are more sensitive to touch and to hot and cold. It's common for people over age 50 to have tooth-root decay.

Decay around the edges, or a margin, of fillings is also common for older adults. Because many older adults lacked benefits of fluoride and modern preventive dental care when they were growing up, they often have a number of dental fillings. Over the years, these fillings may weaken and tend to fracture and leak around the edges. Bacteria accumulate in these tiny crevices causing acid to build up which leads to decay.

You can help prevent tooth decay by following these tips:

- Brush twice a day with fluoride toothpaste.
- Clean between your teeth daily with floss or inter-dental cleaners (ex. proxybrush, softpick).
- Eat nutritious and balanced meals and limit snacking (especially starchy or sugary snacks).
- Check with Dr. Alexander regarding the use of additional fluoride. Flouride has been proven to strengthen your teeth
- Regular dental visits for professional cleanings and check-up examination.



Diet and Tooth Decay

The foods you eat and the beverages you drink can have a direct influence on the incidence and progression of tooth decay, depending upon:

- The form and consistency of the food—whether it’s liquid, solid, sticky or slow to dissolve makes a difference.
- How often you consume sugary or starchy foods and beverages
- How often you eat or drink acidic foods and beverages.
- Medical conditions you may have, such as gastrointestinal reflux and eating disorders, which can increase risk of cavities and weaken teeth.

The bacteria in your mouth use carbohydrates for food, so when you cut back on sugar, and other sources of simple carbohydrates that are easily fermentable, you reduce your cavity risk. Limit added sugars in your diet by reading food labels to determine the amount of added sugar in a food. Since ingredients are listed on the label in order of weight, from most to least, if one of the following terms is listed as one of the first few ingredients, it’s a good bet that food is high in sugar. Another tip for spotting sources of sugar—terms ending in “-ose” indicate a sugar ingredient.

Here are some common added sugars:

- sugar
- brown sugar
- cane sugar
- confectioners' or powdered sugar
- turbinado sugar
- raw sugar
- corn sweeteners
- **corn syrup**
- crystallized cane sugar
- maltose
- fructose
- sucrose
- glucose
- dextrin
- evaporated cane juice
- fruit juice concentrate
- honey
- **high fructose corn syrup**
- invert sugar
- syrup
- malt syrup
- maple syrup
- molasses

Top Sources of Added Sugar in the Diet and Percentages (Source: Dietary Guidelines for Americans, 2010)

- **soft drinks, energy drinks, sports drinks, 35.7%**
- grain-based desserts (cakes, pies) 12.9%
- fruit drinks 10.5%
- dairy-based desserts (ice cream) 6.5%
- candy 6.1%
- ready-to-eat cereals 3.8%
- sugars and honey 3.5%
- tea (sweetened) 3.5%
- yeast breads 2.1%
- all other foods 15.4%



Foods That May Harm Dental Health

Empty calorie foods such as candy (especially hard or sticky candies like lollipops, mints, taffy and caramel), sweets like cookies, cakes and muffins, and snack foods like chips are a cause for dental concern, not only because they offer no nutritional value, but because the amount and type of sugar that they contain that can adhere to teeth. The bacteria in your mouth feed off these sugars, releasing acids, and that's what leads to tooth decay.

Sugar-containing drinks—soda, lemonade, juice and sweetened coffee or tea (iced or hot)—are particularly harmful because sipping them causes a constant sugar bath over teeth, which promotes tooth decay. Nutritious, acidic foods like tomatoes and citrus fruits can have acidic effects on tooth enamel, too, so eat them as part of a meal, not by themselves. Dried fruits, including raisins, are also good choices for a healthy diet, but since they are sticky and adhere to teeth, the plaque acids that they produce continue to harm teeth long after you stop eating them. Opt for a piece of fresh fruit instead.

Foods That May Benefit Dental Health

Cheese, milk, plain yogurt, calcium-fortified tofu, leafy greens and almonds, are foods that may benefit tooth health thanks to their high amounts of calcium and other nutrients they provide. Protein-rich foods like meat, poultry, fish, milk and eggs are the best sources of phosphorus. Both of these minerals play a critical role in dental health, by protecting and rebuilding tooth enamel.

Fruits and vegetables are good choices for a healthy smile since they are high in water and fiber, which balance the sugars they contain and help to clean the teeth. These foods also help stimulate saliva production, which washes harmful acids and food particles away from teeth and helps neutralize acid, protecting teeth from decay. Plus, many contain vitamin C (important for healthy gums and quick healing of wounds) and vitamin A (another key nutrient in building tooth enamel).

Hands down, water—particularly fluoridated water—is the most tooth-friendly beverage.