



## Healthy eating equals healthy teeth

The alarming increase in overweight and obese Australian children brings a host of associated health concerns. Significantly, dentists have seen a correlated increase in childhood tooth decay.

As part of a community campaign to promote good oral health care for babies and toddlers the Australian Dental Association (ADA) has developed guidelines for parents to assist with making healthy eating choices for good oral health and overall health.

The ADA has created a brochure, available from your dentist, which contains comprehensive information on nutrition and teeth.

### What food contributes to poor oral health?

Typically foods that can contribute to dental decay include those high in sugar such as concentrated fruit snack bars, sweets, muesli bars and sugary beverages and juices. This is because the sugar feeds the destructive bacteria in children's mouths, which in turn puts acid on your child's teeth. Refined foods such as savoury, starchy crackers and chips can also have high carbohydrate (sugar) content, therefore it is important to check the food information panel on packaged foods to assist with determining foods with high carbohydrate or sugar content.

These types of foods are high risk for decay especially if eaten often and over long periods. While it is unrealistic to completely cut these foods out, the ADA has some tips to help minimise dental decay related to their consumption. These include:

- Enjoy a wide variety of nutritious foods, especially those rich in calcium and low in acids and sugars
- Enjoy healthy snacks, with cheese and fruit being ideal choices. Some foods assist with protecting teeth – milk and some cheeses are recognised as having protective qualities to help prevent dental decay
- Offer a diet high in fresh fruits and vegetables, wholegrain cereals, lean meats and dairy products
- Limit sugary snacks such as lollies, fruit bars, muesli bars, biscuits, dried fruit, cordials, juices and soft drinks
- Many healthy foods (such as fruit) contain high amounts of sugar. Starchy foods (such as bread, pasta and crackers) and milk products (including breast milk) consumed frequently can cause the growth of dental plaque, which is why you need to make sure your child's teeth are cleaned morning and night

Importantly, a healthy diet **must be** complemented by good oral hygiene - brushing and flossing teeth and regular dental check ups. Daily flossing and brushing greatly reduce the risk of tooth decay.

### **Did you know?**

Some medicines contain sugar for taste. If your child is prescribed medicine, ask your doctor if this can be sugar free; alternative sweeteners can be used.

Xylitol is a natural sweetener from the white birch tree. Foods containing sugar substitutes appear to reduce decay-causing bacteria. Ask your dentist if xylitol products (such as cough syrups or lozenges) would be useful in reducing your children's risk of tooth decay.

### **Fluoride is especially good for strengthening young teeth**

Fluoride is a natural mineral that strengthens tooth enamel and protects against decay. Most capital cities in Australia add fluoride to the water supply at recommended levels. Your dentist can tell you if your local water supply is fluoridated.

Bottled water usually does not contain enough fluoride to offer protection against tooth decay. Some home water filters remove fluoride from tap water. Storage-tank water does not contain fluoride. If your child drinks the majority of their water from bottled or filtered water or tanks, then talk to your dentist about your child's individual fluoride needs. If necessary, the dentist can apply 'topical' fluoride to their teeth, which has been proven to reduce childhood tooth decay.

Too much fluoride while teeth are developing can cause mild mottling of permanent teeth known as *enamel fluorosis*. A young child who regularly swallows adult-strength fluoride toothpaste instead of spitting it out may develop enamel fluorosis. To avoid dental fluorosis:

- Do not use fluoride toothpaste in children under 18 months of age
- Choose a low-fluoride toothpaste for children 18 months to six years of age
- Apply only a smear to the toothbrush and force it into the bristles
- Ensure your child spits out the toothpaste after brushing
- Store all toothpastes out of your child's reach. Some children love the taste of toothpaste and will eat it if given the opportunity

If your child's permanent teeth have erupted with mottling, see your dentist who can suggest treatment to improve the look of the teeth.

### **Did you know?**

Most people are aware that soft drinks are contributors to tooth decay because of the significant amount of sugar that these drinks contain - a 600ml bottle can contain up to 13 teaspoons of sugar.

Less well known is that these drinks, along with fruit juices and cordials, often have high-acid levels, and can play a major role in the development of tooth erosion. Dental erosion is a silent epidemic. Soft drinks, high sugar fruit juices and cordials should be limited and encourage your child to drink fluoridated water as much as possible.

Visit [www.ada.org.au](http://www.ada.org.au) for more information on oral care for babies and toddlers.