

Nutrition and Oral Health

Why does the road to good health begin in the mouth?

Good health begins in the mouth for a very simple reason. The mouth is the beginning of the gastrointestinal tract. It is an important factor in the ability to chew, and thus, to digest nutrients.

Why is nutrition important to oral health?

Nutrition plays two quite different roles in oral health—protective and preventive. The protective role is in promoting healthy development and maintenance of the mouth's tissues and their natural protective mechanisms. The role of nutrition is also to prevent oral disease through the influence of the food's properties on plaque development and saliva flow. As in dietary guidance for general health, consuming a variety of foods is important for oral health.

What are the factors involved in dental decay caused by plaque build-up or acid production?

- **Frequency of eating.** Each time carbohydrate-containing foods are consumed, acids are released to work on teeth. The more frequently carbohydrates are consumed, the more opportunity there is for acids to damage teeth.
- **Food characteristics.** Some foods tend to cling or stick to the teeth. Not necessarily foods one would consider sticky, "cooked starches" such as chips and crackers rank high on the list of sticky foods as compared to candy bars and toffee.
- **Time that food remains in the mouth.** Foods that are slow to dissolve, such as cookies and granola bars, provides more time for the acids that destroy enamel to work than those that dissolve quickly, such as caramels and jelly beans.
- **Whether or not the food is eaten as part of a meal.** High carbohydrate-containing foods produce less acid when eaten with a meal than when eaten alone because saliva production is increased during a meal to help neutralize acid production and clear food from the mouth. Also, when consumed with beverages, sticky foods may be washed from the teeth more quickly, lessening the opportunity for acid production.



Source:

- International Food Information Council; www.ific.org

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