

# Nutrition and Oral Health

Nutrition 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 digest nutrients from food and drinks.

## How does nutrition influence oral health?

Nutrition is protective and preventive for oral health. The protective role promotes healthy development and maintenance of the mouth's tissues and the natural ways our mouth starts the digestion process. Nutrition also prevents oral disease by reducing plaque buildup and increasing saliva flow. Like the dietary guidelines that promote general health, choosing a variety of foods supports oral health.

## How does oral health influence nutrition?

Tooth decay and compromised oral health can make it difficult to bite and chew foods. It may limit the amounts and types of food a person can eat. This increases the likelihood that someone is unable to meet their daily macro- and micronutrient needs.

## Support oral health and nutrition

- **Beverages help keep the mouth clean during a snack or meal.** When consumed with a drink, sticky foods, like chips and crackers, may be washed from the teeth more quickly, lessening the opportunity for acid production that can damage teeth.



- **The longer food remains in the mouth, the more likely it is to damage teeth.** Foods that are slow to dissolve, such as cookies and granola bars, provide more time for the acids that destroy enamel to work than those that dissolve quickly.
- **Specific nutrients are needed for teeth.** Calcium and phosphorous contribute to the mineralization and strong density of teeth. Foods high in calcium and phosphorus include dairy foods like milk, cheese, and yogurt. Fluoride, often found in tap water, toothpaste, and mouthwash, is also needed for the strong structure of teeth.
- **High fiber foods are a natural way to “clean” teeth.** During the chewing process, fibrous foods, like fresh fruits and vegetables, stimulate saliva secretion and create friction on the teeth to remove sugar and other food particles. This should not replace brushing and flossing teeth.
- **Balanced meals support oral health.** Carbohydrate-containing foods produce less acid when eaten in a meal with other foods than when eaten alone. This is because saliva production is increased during a meal to help neutralize acid production and clear food from the mouth.

Together, a nutritious diet and oral health support a high quality of life. Consult your dental professional or a registered dietitian nutritionist (RDN) if you have a serious oral health condition and have concerns regarding nutrition.

#### Sources:

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