

## Dental Tips for Teens

The teen years are a time when teens are learning about themselves and meeting new people and making friends. So what does dental health have to do with any of this? A healthy and attractive smile is important when meeting new people and making friends and it can boost one's confidence when they feel good about themselves.

If teens do not take the time and effort to take care of their teeth and gums they could end up with bad breath, stained teeth, tooth decay, gum disease, tooth loss, or tooth erosion. These will make teens stand out from the crowd but for all the wrong reasons.

A healthy diet is important in maintaining healthy teeth. Every time you eat or drink anything containing sugar, the sugar will react with the bacteria in plaque and produce harmful acids. Your teeth are subjected to this acid attack for up to one hour. It is better to have three or four meals a day and avoid frequent snacking to allow the saliva time to buffer the acid attack and recover. When snacking avoid sugary snacks. If you need to eat between meals try these foods instead: plain popcorn, nuts, cheese, breadsticks, plain yogurt, plain bagels, raw vegetable pieces, or fresh fruit.

If you chew gum it is important that it be sugar free. You can help prevent cavities by chewing gum flavored with 100% Xylitol sweetener. When you chew xylitol gum or mints the bacteria (*Streptococcus mutans*) in the mouth which cause caries are unable to ferment xylitol in their metabolism and therefore their growth is reduced. The number of acid-producing bacteria may fall as much as 90%. Since no acid is formed, the pH of saliva does not fall. This reduces the acid attack on our teeth which can cause cavities to form. After taking xylitol, the bacteria do not stick well on the surface of the teeth and the amount of plaque decreases.

During the past generation, milk intake has decreased while soda pop, sport drinks and juice intake have increased. Pop is no longer an occasional treat. It has become a daily habit for many people, especially kids, teens and young adults. Drinking pop daily is a leading cause of tooth decay. Pop contains acid. This acid attacks your teeth and causes demineralization which weakens your teeth and makes them porous and provides a place for cariogenic bacteria to take hold. Each acid attack lasts about 20 minutes. After 20 minutes your saliva buffers the acid attack and starts the process of remineralizing your teeth. The acid attack starts over with every sip of pop. In addition to decay or cavities or caries, drinking a lot of pop has been linked to diabetes, obesity and osteoporosis. All the calories in pop come from sugar. There is no nutritional value in pop.

Every time you eat or drink anything acidic, the enamel on your teeth becomes softer for a short while, and loses some of its mineral content. Your saliva will slowly neutralize this acidity in your mouth and restore it to its natural balance. However, if this acid attack happens too often, the mouth does not have a chance to repair itself and tiny particles of enamel can be brushed away. Over time, you would start to lose the surface of your teeth. Acidic foods and drinks such as fruit and fruit juices, particularly citric ones including lemon and orange, can be particularly harmful to teeth. Fruit juices and fruits contain natural acids, which can be just as harmful to teeth. Fizzy drinks are also a cause of enamel erosion. It is important to have acidic foods and drinks at mealtimes only.

Avoid smoking and alcohol. Smoking can cause tooth staining, gum disease, tooth loss and mouth cancer. Smoking is also one of the main causes of bad breath. Alcoholic drinks can also cause mouth cancer. Smoking and drinking together increases the risk of developing it even more.

Wear a mouth guard to help protect you against broken and damaged teeth and even broken or dislocated jaws. It is important to wear a professionally made mouth guard whenever you play any sport that involves contact or moving objects.

It is important to remember that dental caries is a preventable disease for most people with regular brushing, at least twice a day, and flossing, at least once a day. Also drinking water with fluoride and using toothpaste with fluoride helps to remineralize and strengthen teeth. Finally, regular checkups and cleanings every 6 months with your dentist can help to keep your teeth healthy.

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