



Foods and Drinks Best for Your Teeth

To prevent cavities and maintain good [oral health](#), your [diet](#) -- what you eat and how often you eat -- are important factors. Changes in your mouth start the minute you eat certain foods. Bacteria in the mouth convert sugars from the foods you eat to acids, and it's the acids that begin to attack the enamel on teeth, starting the decay process. The more often you eat and snack, the more frequently you are exposing your teeth to the cycle of decay.

Mouth-Healthy Foods and Drinks

The best food choices for the health of your mouth include cheeses, chicken or other meats, nuts, and milk. These foods are thought to protect tooth enamel by providing the calcium and phosphorus needed to re-mineralize teeth (a natural process by which minerals are re-deposited in tooth enamel after being removed by acids).

Other food choices include firm/crunchy fruits (for example, apples and pears) and vegetables. These foods have a high water content, which dilutes the effects of the sugars they contain, and stimulate the flow of saliva (which helps protect against decay by washing away food particles and buffering acid). Acidic foods, such as citrus fruits, tomatoes, and lemons, should be eaten as part of a larger meal to minimize the acid from them.

Poor food choices include candy -- such as lollipops, hard candies, and mints -- cookies, cakes, pies, breads, muffins, potato chips, pretzels, french fries, bananas, raisins, and other dried fruits. These foods contain large amounts of sugar and/or can stick to teeth, providing a fuel source for bacteria. In addition, [cough](#) drops should be used only when necessary as they, like sugary candy, contribute to tooth decay because they continuously coat the teeth with sugar.

The best beverage choices include water (especially fluoridated water), milk, and unsweetened tea. Limit your consumption of sugar-containing drinks, including soft drinks, lemonade, and coffee or tea with added sugar. Also, avoid day-long sipping of sugar-containing drinks -- day-long sipping exposes your teeth to constant sugar and, in turn, constant decay-causing acids.

Sugar Substitutes and Sugar-Free Products

Sugar substitutes are available that look and taste like sugar; however, they are not digested the same way as sugar, so they don't "feed" the bacteria in the mouth and therefore don't produce decay-causing acids. They include: erythritol, isomalt, sorbitol, and mannitol. Other sugar substitutes that are available in the U.S. include saccharin, aspartame (marketed as Equal), acesulfame potassium (marketed as Sunett), and sucralose (marketed as Splenda).

Sugarless or sugar-free food sometimes simply means that no sugar was added to the foods during processing. However, this does not mean that the foods do not contain other natural sweeteners, such as honey, molasses, evaporated cane sugar, fructose, barley malt, or rice syrup. These natural sweeteners contain the same number of calories as sugar and can be just as harmful to teeth.

To determine if the sugarless or sugar-free foods you buy contain natural sweeteners, examine the ingredients label. Words that end in '-ose' (like sucrose and fructose) usually indicate the presence of a natural sweetener. On the label, look under sugars or carbohydrates.

Is Chewing Gum OK for Teeth?

Chewing sugarless gum is actually beneficial to your teeth as chewing helps dislodge food that becomes stuck to your teeth and also increases saliva flow to buffer (neutralize) mouth acids. Gums that contain the sugar substitute xylitol even reduce cavities. Chewing gum can be a problem, however, if you have jaw pain or other issues with your jaw.

Teeth and Gum Care Tips

These are some basic tips for caring for teeth and gums:

- Brush your teeth regularly. Brush at least twice a day and preferably after every meal and snack.
- Use fluoride-containing toothpaste.
- Floss at least once a day.
- Visit your dentist regularly for check-ups and cleanings -- typically twice a year.
- Eat a variety of foods to maintain overall health. Eat fewer foods containing sugars and starches between meals. If you must snack, choose nutritious foods, such as cheese, raw vegetables, plain yogurt, or a firm fruit (such as an apple).

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