HOW TO REDUCE YOUR RISK OF TOOTH DECAY

Tooth decay (“dental caries”) is a complex disease process, caused by bacteria, and mediated by other important factors. Nearly everyone has the bacteria (mutans streptococci) that cause tooth decay. But, the two primary factors that control these bacteria, and therefore, determine whether you get new cavities are (1) your diet and (2) the amount of fluoride your teeth receive. We think it’s important that you know there are many things YOU can do to reduce your risk for getting more cavities in the future.

1. Reduce the number of times per day that you eat refined carbohydrates (“sugars”). People who have more that three to five exposures of sugars per day tend to develop a greater number of cavities. What are exposures? They are “eating occasions” separated by at least 20 minutes. For example, a bowl of Frosted Flakes at 9:00 AM, followed immediately by a handful of M&Ms is considered one exposure: a bowl of Frosted Flakes at 9:00AM, followed by the M&Ms at 9:20 AM or 9:30 AM is considered two exposures. Why 20 minutes? Because, whenever you eat, the bacteria in your mouth eat, too; they metabolize refined carbohydrates to acid, and it takes about 20 minutes for the acid to clear from your mouth. The more frequently this acid is produced, the more likely it becomes that you will develop tooth decay. So, don’t keep soda (there are 12 teaspoons of sugar per can) or coffee with sugar on your desk and sip on it throughout the day- this provides the bacteria with a continual supply of sugar! Sweets aren’t the only foods that promote acid formation and tooth decay. Many foods that people generally consider “healthy”- fruit juices, sports drinks, and dried fruit (like raisins) - contain high levels of refined carbohydrates. So do snack foods such as potato chips, pretzels, and crackers (even saltines). Even diet sodas, although they contain artificial sweeteners, can be harmful because they are naturally acidic. On the other hand, fresh fruits and many cheeses do not promote tooth decay. You cannot and should not eliminate all carbohydrate from your daily diet. Instead, try to reduce your number of between meal snacks and limit your refined carbohydrate intake to mealtimes.

2. Brush your teeth three times a day with fluoride toothpaste. Fluoride helps make your teeth more resistant to the decay process. Whenever possible, brush immediately after meals and snacks. This removes food particles and helps clear the bacterial acids more quickly. Incidentally contrary to popular belief, rinsing with water after meals has very little effect on bacterial acids, although it may help clear food debris. For maximum benefit, your teeth need frequent exposure to fluoride- brush for at least 2 minutes, three times each day. Always use a soft toothbrush and floss your teeth at least once each day.

3. Use a fluoride mouth rinse at bedtime. While you’re asleep, your salivary flow diminishes, leaving your teeth less protected from bacterial acids. This is the most important time of day to clean your teeth. So, just before you go to bed, after you’ve brushed and flossed, rinse with a 0.05% sodium fluoride rinse (Listerine Total Care R Act R and Fluoriguard R are examples- available in supermarkets, Wal-Mart, etc.), and then don’t have anything else to eat or drink. This gives your teeth a “boost” of fluoride protection.

4. Chew sugarless gum. Chewing sugarless gum increases your salivary flow, which helps to neutralize and clear bacterial acids. If you chew gum, use a sugarless gum such as Trident R, Extra R Carefree R, or Ice Breakers Ice Cubes R, or Mentos Pure R with xylitol since the bacteria in your mouth generally cannot metabolize “non sugar” sweeteners. Websites where you can purchase xylitol gum online include www.xlear.com and www.epicdental.com and www.carifree.com as well as others. If you cannot chew gum, sucking on sugarless candy such as IceBreakers FROST (Target, Food Lion, CVS) with xylitol is a good substitute. Your dentist can recommend more specific strategies based on your individual needs.