Eating Right: Choose foods carefully to take bite out of tooth decay

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A healthful diet can make all the difference when it comes to preventing painful cavities, tooth loss and gum disease.

Changes begin in your mouth with the first bite of some foods. When you eat and drink starchy and sugary foods, you create a meal for bacteria in plaque.

Plaque is a thin, clear film on teeth that is home to bacteria. It needs to be removed by brushing and flossing after meals. This helps protect teeth from decay. If this is not done, plaque hardens into tartar, which needs to be professionally removed.

It is not a secret that soda and sugar-sweetened beverages are tied to tooth decay. The sugar in these drinks makes an instant feast for the bacteria in plaque, which make acid next to teeth as they eat sugars and starches.

When this happens over and over, the acid eats away at the hard enamel coating of teeth.

The longer the food remains there, the more acids will be made. As enamel is eroded, bacteria move into the tooth and create cavities.

Our adult teeth are meant to serve us during our whole life. It is important to take care of them with regular visits to the dentist and scheduled cleaning by a dental hygienist.

Poor dental health can limit the foods we are able to eat. Without a healthful, balanced diet, we are at risk for vitamin and mineral deficiencies. This can lead to health problems.

Recent research has shown that people who brush their teeth twice a day and have their teeth cleaned professionally have a much lower risk of heart attack and stroke than those who do not.

What else can you do?

■ Limit snacking between meals. If you need a snack, choose wisely and chew sugarless gum afterward.

■ Check the ingredient list on food packages. If you read a label and see an ingredient that ends in “ose,” the product contains sugar. Sugars, including natural sugars, are listed under “sugars” or “carbohydrates” on the nutrition label. Remember that sugar-free foods are not always calorie-free.
Natural sweeteners still contain sugar. Honey, molasses, fructose, barley malt, fruit juice and rice syrup are all examples of natural sweeteners. Sugar in any form is still sugar.

Choose sugar alcohols in moderation.

Xylitol, sorbitol and mannitol are sweeteners that do not contain sugar. Remember that large amounts may cause diarrhea.

“No sugar added” means sugar was not added to the product, but the product may contain natural sweeteners. Juice is an example. Many juices claim “no sugar added,” but when you look at the label, it has a lot of sugar because fruit is naturally sweet.

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