

Oral Health and Summer Break

Summer break is a great time for most kids, but the change from their normal school-day routines may not be so good for their oral health. A looser schedule increases the tendency to snack or sip throughout the day. Lazy summer days make cool, sugary treats and drinks especially tempting. And not having a set schedule can lead to poor nutrition if kids skip fruits, vegetables, and dairy products in favor of pre-packaged convenience or snack foods.

Does it really matter what kids eat? Or when they eat it?

Yes! Sweet treats and drinks are more harmful because the acids produced by sugars begin attacking teeth almost immediately. Other foods that are high in carbohydrates, like breads, cereals, and crackers (common snack foods), also tend to break down into acid-producing sugars fairly quickly. These acids will stay in the mouth for about 20 – 30 minutes after you eat or drink. So if your child is nibbling, snacking, and sipping on these kinds of foods throughout the day, his/her teeth will be under constant attack by decay-causing acids!

Of course, you don't want your children to skip healthy carbohydrate foods like whole grain breads and cereals. These foods provide important nutritional value. But you do want to limit constant snacking and make sure that kids remember to brush their teeth after eating. Provide them with nutritious meals at regular times each day and encourage them to avoid between meal snacks, especially sugary treats and drinks. Make sure they keep up their normal brushing and flossing routine.

What type of damage can be caused?

When kids (and adults) don't clean their teeth and mouth often or well enough, both teeth and gums will suffer. Tooth decay occurs when bacteria in your mouth combines with the sugars in your food to make acids that eat away at teeth. This results in cavities, also called dental caries. Gum disease is also caused by bacteria and can cause gums to swell, bleed, and pull away from teeth. If not treated, both tooth decay and gum disease can cause pain, infection, and tooth loss.

What can parents/caregivers do to prevent tooth decay and gum disease?

- Encourage kids to eat nutritious meals regularly and avoid between meal snacks. Help them out by establishing a routine summer schedule.
- Make sure kids brush their teeth with fluoride toothpaste after meals and snacks. From the time the first tooth appears through age 2, use only a "smear" of fluoride toothpaste. For children ages 3 – 5, use a pea-sized amount.
- Get information from the dentist about dental sealants to protect teeth from decay.

Summer break should be a fun time for kids, but make sure it doesn't turn into a bad time for their teeth and gums! Do what you can to maintain a healthy eating and oral health schedule for your child. And remember, a healthy mouth is important for the whole family, not just kids!

Sources: American Dental Association (ADA), WebMD, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)

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