

Managing Dental Decay – The Basics

Dental decay (cavities) is caused by sugar-loving bacteria in your mouth that can never be completely eliminated. Fillings and crowns replace the decayed hole in the tooth, but you will get decay around them again if your diet and cleaning habits remain unchanged. Dental decay is preventable, but you *must* modify your diet if you want to prevent cavities. If you don't change your diet you will still get decay—even if you are meticulous about brushing, flossing, and using fluoride! No one can eliminate sugar from their diet. It is necessary for normal body functioning. But you must be wise about when you eat sweets, how you eat them, and what you do afterwards.

To prevent dental decay:

- **Be aware of what has sugar in it, and cut back if possible:** soda, sports drinks like Gatorade, sweetened tea, fruit drinks, fruit roll-ups, fruit, raisins, honey, sugar gum, milk, hard candy, chewy candy, chocolate, caramel, cough drops, breath mints, and sweets like ice cream, cake, pie, donuts, etc.
 - Switch to diet products whenever possible.
 - Only have sweets along with breakfast, lunch or dinner—no snacking.
 - If you have anything besides water between meals, eat or drink it all at once and immediately brush your teeth, chew gum, or rinse with water.
 - A can of soda, if sipped throughout the day, will cause *much more* damage than a whole 2 liter bottle consumed in one short sitting.
 - Never get up in the night and eat or drink anything except water. If you must eat during the night, rinse well or brush afterwards.

- **Brush twice and floss once per day.**

- **Use high dose fluoride toothpaste** in place of your regular toothpaste at night, and do not rinse. It should be the last thing that touches your teeth before bed. It is by prescription only.

- **Chew xylitol-sweetened gum or mints** (xylitol should be the only sweetener in them). It is most effective if chewed for 5-10 minutes 3-5 times per day, after every meal or snack. Xylitol is a natural tooth-friendly sugar that stalls bacteria. Sugar-free gum with other sweeteners will work, but they aren't as effective as xylitol.

- Have **high dose fluoride varnish** painted on your teeth at every cleaning.

- **Use chlorhexidine rinse for 1 week every 3 months.** It is by prescription only.