

## NUTRITION AND ORAL HEALTH

You may be able to prevent two of the most common diseases of modern civilization - tooth decay and periodontal disease by improving your diet. Decay results when the hard tissues of our teeth are destroyed by acid products from oral bacteria. Certain foods and food combinations are linked to higher levels of cavity-causing bacteria. Although poor nutrition does not directly cause periodontal disease, many researchers believe that the disease progresses faster and is more severe in patients whose diet does not supply the necessary nutrients. Periodontal disease affects the supporting tissues of the teeth and is the leading cause of tooth loss in adults.

Poor nutrition affects the entire immune system, thereby increasing susceptibility to many disorders. People with lowered immune systems have been shown to be at higher risk for periodontal disease. Today's research is showing a link between oral health and systemic conditions such as diabetes and cardiovascular disease. Eating a variety of foods as part of a well balanced diet may not only improve your dental health but also reduce the risk for other diseases.

### How can I plan my meals and snacks to promote better oral health?

Eat a well-balanced diet characterized by moderation and variety. Develop eating habits that follow the recommendations from reputable health organizations. Choose foods from the basic food groups. Avoid fad diets that limit or eliminate entire food groups, which usually results in vitamin and mineral deficiencies. Always keep your mouth moist by drinking lots of water. Saliva protects both hard and soft tissues. If you have a dry mouth then supplement your diet with sugarless candy or gum to stimulate your salivary flow.

Two important factors affecting tooth decay are:

1. How much you eat: Malnutrition can result from too much nourishment as easily as too little. Each time you eat, you create an environment for oral bacteria to develop. Making a habit of eating too much of just about anything, too frequently, should be avoided.
2. How often you eat: Foods that cling to your teeth promote tooth decay. Every time you eat foods containing carbohydrates such as candy, cookies, breads, pastas, potatoes and even corn, acid attacks your teeth for at least 20 minutes. Choose dentally healthy foods such as nuts, raw vegetables, plain yogurt, cheese and sugarless gum or candy.

When you eat fermentable carbohydrates such as crackers, cookies and chips, eat them with your meal instead of by themselves. These foods do not dissolve in saliva and clear the mouth until they have been broken down into simple sugars. The process is likely to take hours and extends the time bacteria attack the enamel of your teeth. Combinations of foods neutralize acids in the mouth and inhibit tooth decay. For example, enjoy cheese with your crackers. Cheese and other dairy products can be anti-cariogenic due to their buffering effect. They help neutralize acids in the mouth. Your snack will be just as satisfying and better for your dental health.

## Why do I need fluoride?

Fluoride is a compound of the element fluorine, which is found universally throughout nature in water, soil, air and in most foods. Fluoride is absorbed easily into tooth enamel, especially in children's developing teeth. Once teeth are fully formed, fluoride makes the entire tooth structure more resistant to decay and promotes remineralization. Remineralization aids in repairing early decay before the damage is even visible. Drinking excessive amounts of fluoridated water can cause dental fluorosis, which is characterized by chalky white spots or lines and pitted and brown stained enamel.

## When should I consult my dentist or dietician about my nutritional status?

Always ask your dentist if you're not sure how your nutrition / diet may affect your oral health. Conditions such as tooth loss, pain, or joint dysfunction can impair chewing and are often found in elderly people and those who are undergoing medical treatment. People experiencing these problems may be too isolated or weakened to eat nutritionally balanced meals at a time when it is particularly critical. Talk to your dental health professional about what you can do for yourself or someone you know in these circumstances.

The following is a list of useful Canadian Web sites that offer information on nutrition and bone health:

- Canadian Health Network [www.canadian-health-network.ca](http://www.canadian-health-network.ca)
- Dairy Farmers of Canada [www.dairyfarmers.org/eng/health/index.asp](http://www.dairyfarmers.org/eng/health/index.asp)
- Dietitians of Canada [www.dietisians.ca/english/frames.html](http://www.dietisians.ca/english/frames.html)
- Health Canada [www.hc-sc.gc.ca/hppb/nutrition](http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/hppb/nutrition)
- National Institute of Nutrition [www.nin.ca](http://www.nin.ca)
- Osteoporosis Society of Canada [www.osteoporosis.ca](http://www.osteoporosis.ca)