

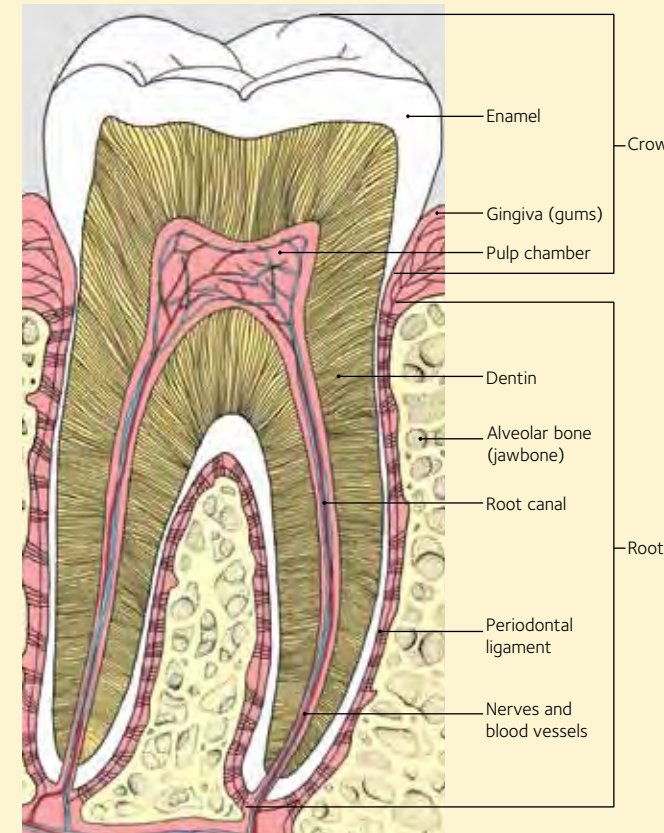
Tooth Decay

Although some people think only children get tooth decay, all of us are at risk our whole lives. By following a healthy oral care routine and making smart food choices, you can lower your risk for tooth decay. This brochure will tell you why tooth decay is a problem and how you can avoid it.



What is tooth decay, and why is it a problem?

Diagram of a Healthy Tooth



Tooth decay is a disease that damages and breaks down teeth. A tooth has an outer layer (enamel), a middle layer (dentin), and a center (pulp). The more layers affected by decay, the worse the damage.

Tooth decay is a serious public health problem. It is four times more common than asthma among teens aged 14 to 17 years. Untreated tooth decay can lead to pain, loss of teeth, and even loss of confidence. People with tooth pain often cannot get through their daily routines. They cannot eat or sleep properly, and may miss days of work or school.

An abscess (pus-filled sac) from a cavity can cause serious or even life-threatening infections when not properly treated. **It is much simpler and more affordable to prevent tooth decay than to repair a decayed tooth.**



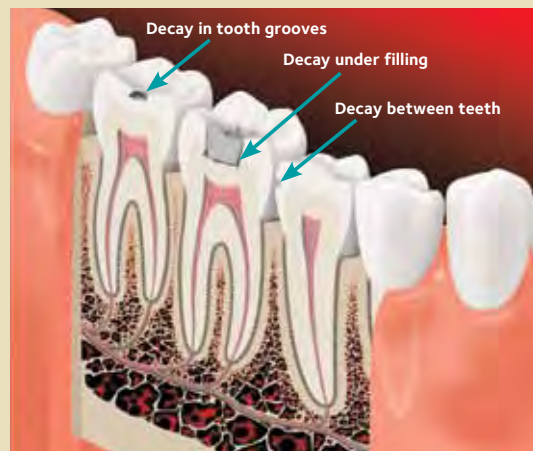
What causes tooth decay?

Bacteria in the mouth feed on the sugars found in foods and drinks. The bacteria produce acids that attack the teeth. Each time these foods and drinks are consumed, acids attack the teeth for 20 minutes or longer.

When you have sugary foods or drinks many times a day, or sip on the same sugary drink for long periods of time, the acid attacks your tooth enamel again and again. The acid eats away at the tooth, and can cause decay. A hole called a cavity can form.

Mouth bacteria thrive on all kinds of sugar, not just candy—soda pop, sports drinks, fruit juice, and even milk. As bacteria build up on the teeth, they form a sticky film called plaque (rhymes with “back”). The stickiness of plaque keeps the harmful acids against the teeth. That’s why snacking and constant sipping can put you at risk for tooth decay.

Progress of Tooth Decay



Early decay may not be easy for the patient to notice.

Who gets tooth decay?

People of all ages can get tooth decay. Risk may increase among those who:

- often sip and snack on foods and drinks high in sugars
- drink bottled water or other water without fluoride, which helps protect teeth
- have dry mouths due to medications or other reasons
- have weak enamel due to genetics or a childhood illness
- don't brush twice daily and floss once
- don't visit their dentist regularly

Can tooth decay be passed from person to person?

Not exactly, but the bacteria that cause decay can be shared. Parents may pass along harmful bacteria to infants and children, for example. Bacteria can be passed by kissing, sharing a cup or spoon, or anything else that carries a drop of saliva from one mouth to the other.



Decay under the surface may be larger than it looks from the outside.

Can it be prevented?

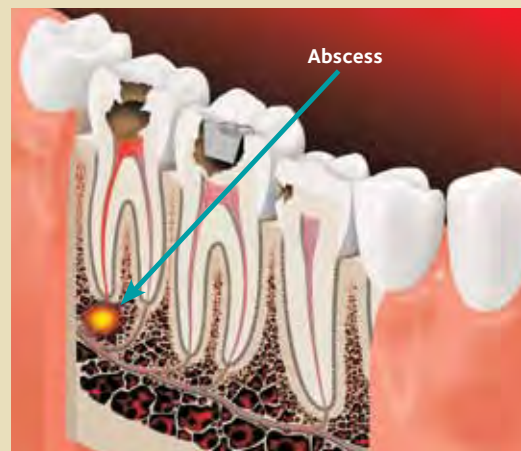
Yes! Here's how:

- Brush your teeth twice a day with fluoride toothpaste.
- Floss or use another between-the-teeth cleaner once a day.
- Avoid frequent sipping and snacking on sugary foods and drinks.
- Drink water with fluoride.
- See your dentist regularly.

When choosing dental care products, look for those that show the American Dental Association's Seal of Acceptance. The Seal of Acceptance tells you that, when used as directed, the product meets the ADA's standards for safety and effectiveness.



Your saliva helps prevent tooth decay, too. It reduces acid damage to a tooth by washing away sticky, sugary foods that feed bacteria. Chewing sugarless gum with the ADA Seal of Acceptance after eating can increase saliva flow and help rinse away sugars. The minerals in saliva also can help repair the tooth.



If not treated, tooth decay can cause an abscess and can lead to serious infections.

Common places where decay forms

Tooth decay can damage any tooth. It often occurs between the teeth and in the grooves of the back teeth, where bits of food collect. Back teeth are harder to keep clean because they are not as easy to reach. Decay also can form at the tooth root and go below the gum line.

Do you have tooth decay?

Tooth decay can get worse quickly, but it often takes months or years for a cavity to develop. Symptoms of tooth decay can include spots on the teeth, bad breath, and loose fillings. Tell your dentist if your teeth are sensitive to heat or cold or if you have any tooth pain. Your dentist will examine your teeth and take X-rays if necessary.

How is decay treated?

Treatment depends on how early the decay is caught. Before cavities form, fluoride treatments may solve the problem. If you have a cavity, you'll need a filling. A large cavity may need a crown to replace the decayed part of the tooth. If the center (pulp) of your tooth is involved, root canal treatment may be your last chance to save the tooth. Finally, a badly damaged tooth might have to be pulled and replaced. Your dentist will discuss options and plan the best way to get your mouth healthy again.

Summary

Tooth decay can affect people of all ages. Poor hygiene and unhealthy food choices can lead to decay. A steady diet of sugary foods and drinks, including sports drinks and flavored water, can damage teeth. Clean your teeth carefully at home every day and visit your dentist regularly.

Teeth can last a lifetime if you take good care of them.