

What You Eat Affects Tooth Decay



You know you need nutritious food to stay healthy. If you were forced to eat an 1800-calorie diet of candy bars, your body would tell you — forcefully — that it wasn't happy.

Let's consider approximately how many candy bars that kind of a diet would allow you to eat in a single day. Generally speaking, candy bars have between 210 and 280 calories each. Divide those numbers into 1800, and you get somewhere between six and a half to eight and a half bars.

It's hard to imagine eating that much sugar in one sitting, but it seems likely that your stomach would soon feel empty again if you did. You might also feel really sick. Later, you would probably experience really intense hunger as your digestive system did its best to let you know you had just made some poor choices.

Although your teeth would not complain quite as much as your stomach would, you would be paying a penalty there as well. The bacteria that causes your teeth to rot just happen to love

sugar as much or more than you do. It also enjoys starches, which are made of glucose. In fact, the glucose found in starch is exactly the same glucose that can be found in your blood. When you eat a starch, enzymes in your digestive system break apart the starch molecules; once the bonds are broken, glucose is what remains. The bacteria produces acid from sugar and starch, and that acid eats away at the enamel on your teeth. Sooner or later, tooth decay sets in because the enamel protecting your teeth has been destroyed.

You would probably never eat that much sugar in just one sitting, but you very well might drink it. Soft drinks pack a huge amount of sugar into every serving. Would you ever drink water, tea or coffee that had 11 teaspoons of sugar stirred into it? It's doubtful, but that's the amount of sugar in a single serving of some soft drinks. Nutritionists have

been doing a good job of drawing attention to this fact, though, because the volume of carbonated soft drinks consumed in the U.S. has been going down ever since 2005. People are increasingly choosing to drink water, juice, or tea instead. If you haven't joined them, you should.

If sugar and starch are so damaging, to both your teeth and (it should be mentioned) your waistline, what should you be focusing on instead?

You're not going to be surprised by the answer: more vegetables, among other things. You should also be getting a healthy amount of lean protein, fruit — keep in mind you want to eat it as close to its natural state as possible; the fiber it contains is really good for you, but drinking it in the form of juice will give you too many calories and probably too much sugar as well — and whole grains. Limit your snacks, especially if you won't be able to brush afterward, and drink plenty of water.

You should also be focusing on keeping your mouth clean. When you eat, the acid produced by the bacteria in your mouth is attacking your teeth for 20 minutes or more after you swallow. Brush your teeth promptly after you eat, or at least use some water from a water fountain to help neutralize the acid. Make sure you really are brushing two or more times a day even if you can't manage it after every meal. Use dental floss at least four times a week (daily is better) and find a good mouthwash, one that's been approved by the American Dental Association (ADA). And finally, make sure you visit your dentist two times every year for preventive maintenance. A good dentist can help you keep your teeth healthy throughout your entire life. It used to be common to lose your teeth in old age, but that's something dentists have been able to change in recent decades. This is one area where you don't want to be a throwback.

By choosing nutritious foods, and also by practicing good oral hygiene habits, you will be more likely to have a healthy mouth, a healthy body, and a healthy weight. All of those things are a lot better than living off candy bars.