

# Eating habits for a healthy smile and body

**Y**our diet—including what and how often you eat—plays an important role in attaining and maintaining a healthy smile. Candy has long been associated with dental caries (cavities), but your teeth are at risk from more than just candy. Many foods and beverages, particularly those high in added sugar, can set the caries process in motion.

## CARING FOR YOUR TEETH AND GUMS

Dental caries is caused by a thin film of bacteria called “plaque” that coats your teeth. When you eat or drink, the plaque bacteria digest any sugar and produce acids that attack your tooth enamel. The stickiness of plaque keeps these acids in contact with the enamel for some time after you have finished eating or drinking. With repeated and prolonged exposure to these acids, your enamel eventually can wear through, resulting in caries.

It is important to remove plaque regularly by brushing your teeth twice daily and cleaning between your teeth with floss or another interdental cleaner once a day. If plaque builds up, it can cause swelling and bleeding of the gingival (gum) tissue. Eventually, the hard and soft tissues that hold your teeth in place can be damaged, and you run the risk of losing teeth.

You should visit your dentist regularly for a complete oral examination and a professional cleaning.

## DIET AND YOUR DENTAL HEALTH

Attention to your eating habits can reduce your risk of developing caries. Frequent snacking or sipping on sugar-containing beverages such as soda, juices, sports drinks—even flavored waters—creates an environment for decay because it exposes your teeth repeatedly to acid attacks.

Keeping an eye on the amount of sugar in your diet also can help protect your smile. Most foods contain some sugar. For example, fruits and vegetables contain sugars naturally, while other foods have added sugars. You can minimize the risk of developing

caries as a result of consuming sugar by limiting foods with added sugar in your diet. Also, eat sweets as part of a meal rather than as a separate snack. Salivary flow increases more during meals than during snacks. Saliva helps weaken cavity-causing acids and rinses food particles from the mouth.

Chewing gum also stimulates salivary flow. The increased flow adds calcium and phosphate to the saliva, which help strengthen tooth enamel. Chewing sugarless gum for 20 minutes after meals can help prevent tooth decay.<sup>1,2</sup> Look for the American Dental Association (ADA) Seal of Acceptance when choosing a sugarless gum. The Seal means a product has met the ADA’s criteria for safety and effectiveness.

## A BALANCED DIET

A balanced diet is important to maintain your overall health. The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) recommends that you select a mix of foods from the following groups: fruits and vegetables, especially dark green or orange ones; foods made with whole grains, such as whole wheat bread, brown rice or oatmeal; milk products, such as low-fat yogurt or low-fat cheese; beans and meats, such as chicken, fish or lean beef; oils, such as cooking oils or oils found in nuts and some types of fish.

You can learn more about the USDA recommendations and find suggestions for developing a healthy lifestyle on its Web site.<sup>3</sup> The ADA’s Web site offers a wealth of information about healthy smiles and dental care. Visit the ADA at “[www.ada.org](http://www.ada.org)”. ■

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“For the Dental Patient” provides general information on dental treatments to dental patients. It is designed to prompt discussion between dentist and patient about treatment options and does not substitute for the dentist’s professional assessment based on the individual patient’s needs and desires.

1. Beiswanger BB, Katz A, Boneta E, et al. The effect of chewing sugar-free gum after meals on clinical caries incidence. *JADA* 1998;129(11):1623-1626.

2. Szbke J, Banoczy J, Proskin HM. Effect of after-meal sucrose-free gum-chewing on clinical caries. *J Dent Res* 2001;80(8):1725-1729.

3. United States Department of Agriculture. *MyPyramid.gov*. “[www.mypyramid.gov](http://www.mypyramid.gov)”. Accessed Sept. 27, 2010.