

Tooth Decay

What is tooth decay?

Tooth decay, also known as dental caries, is a disease of the teeth that affects individuals of all ages, although it is more common in children and young adults. Dental caries occurs when the tooth enamel is destroyed. Decay begins at the tooth's hard external surface, and may advance to internal structures of the tooth including the dentin and pulp. The earlier decay is treated, the better the chance of saving the tooth.

How does it happen?

The bacteria inside of the mouth change the food (primarily sugars and starches) we eat into acids. Over a period of time, the bacteria and acids form a sticky deposit called dental plaque that clings to the teeth. If the plaque is not removed, the acids will destroy the tooth's enamel surface -- resulting in holes or cavities. Sugar and starches (such as candy, cakes, cookies, milk and pop) are responsible for much of tooth decay, but sour or acidic foods (such as lemons and fruit juices), also contribute to decay because they change the pH (acidity level) in the mouth. If left untreated, the decay will progress and can lead to tooth infection. Children's teeth primarily decay in the grooves. In addition to the grooves, older adults decay in other areas, including the roots of the teeth, which may be exposed as a result of receding gums.

How do you prevent tooth decay?

Taking good care of your teeth, eating nutritious foods and visiting the dentist on a regular basis will help prevent cavities. The American Dental Association provides these guidelines for preventing tooth decay. They include:

- Brushing twice a day with a fluoride toothpaste;
- Cleaning between the teeth daily with floss;
- Eating well-balanced meals and limit snacking;
- Visiting the dentist on a regular basis for check-ups and cleanings;
- Talking with your dentist about the use of fluoride to strengthen the teeth and dental sealants (a plastic protective coating put on the surface of the back teeth) to protect from decay.

If brushing is not possible, the next best thing is to rinse the mouth with water to neutralize the acids and change the pH level in the mouth, which may curb tooth decay.

When should you contact a dentist?

Most dental professionals recommend visiting a dentist at least every six months for a cleaning and a thorough examination. You should consult a dentist if you experience any problems or need emergency care.