

# Decay & Nutrition

## Dental Decay

Dental decay is a **dental disease** that is contagious and chronic.

- **Contagious** - We “catch” the bacteria that causes decay. This usually happens when we are babies from using bottles, pacifiers, spoons and other items that our parents or siblings had in their mouth first.
- **Chronic** - The bacteria that causes dental disease can get worse and does not go away by itself.

### Dental Disease

A variety of conditions that can affect parts of the mouth, often caused by poor oral hygiene. This includes (but is not limited to) cavities, gum disease, oral cancer and abscess.



## Things That Hurt Your Mouth:

- **Acid** - This comes from acidic foods and drinks like soda pop. It is also produced when bacteria in your mouth feeds on sugar from food and drinks.
- **Plaque** - A sticky mix of bacteria, saliva (spit) and residue from foods and drinks. The bacteria and sugars in plaque produce acid, and the sticky plaque makes it stay on your teeth. Plaque is tooth-colored and difficult to see.
- **Dry mouth** - A lack of saliva caused by medications, medical conditions, or because a person does not take food by mouth (as with a G-tube).
- **Tobacco** - Using tobacco (including smokeless tobacco) and vaping is another cause of dental decay. It can lead to dry mouth, oral cancer, gum disease and cavities.

## Things That Help Your Mouth:

- **Daily mouth care sessions** - Will ideally include toothbrushing two times a day with fluoride toothpaste and flossing one time a day. Some people's needs will be different.
- **Fluoride** - A mineral that helps teeth stay strong and to resist dental decay. Fluoride can be found in many toothpastes or as a treatment by a member of the dental team.
- **Healthy nutrition** - Limiting sugar and simple starch helps to prevent dental decay (see next page for more information).



### Daily Mouth Care Session

Any oral health care that happens in one sitting on a daily basis.

## Nutrition's Role

While all foods and drinks (except for water) have at least some sugar, there are some types of food that have more sugar and are less healthy for teeth. It is also important to consider how often a person eats sugar. Constantly eating even small amounts of sugar does not allow your mouth time to wash away the sugar with saliva.

### Some common sugary foods and drinks to limit:

- Fruit juice and soda drinks.
  - Beware of diet sodas because the acid can still do damage.
  - Instead, stick to water and milk.
- Dried fruit and hard candies.
  - Whole and cut fruits are a healthier treat.
- Sugary baked goods.
  - As a rare treat, limit to mealtimes.
- Sticky foods (fruit snacks, taffy, gummy candies).
  - These foods stick to teeth, allowing the sugar to do a lot of damage.
  - Instead of gummy vitamins, use a tablet or capsule-style vitamin.
- Alcoholic drinks.
  - If alcohol is served, limit to mealtimes.



**Nutrition**  
Food and drinks that give your body the nutrients it needs to survive.



## Special Considerations

Some sources of sugar cannot be avoided. For example, thickening agents for people with trouble swallowing have starch (a form of sugar) and citric acid. However, regular mouth care sessions will help to prevent dental decay.

Some caregivers have been taught to use thickening agents during toothbrushing instead of water. However, **using the thickener during toothbrushing can harm teeth**. Instead of using a thickener, use a very small amount of toothpaste or none at all.



However, if you do not use toothpaste during brushing, the teeth will not have the benefit of fluoride. It is important that you apply fluoride in other ways to strengthen the teeth. One of these options may work for the person you support:

- Apply a small smear of toothpaste with a cotton swab.
- Have a dentist use a fluoride rinse.
- Have a dentist apply a fluoride varnish.
- Talk to the dental team of the person you support for other recommendations.



# Motivational Interviewing: Decay & Nutrition

## Better Conversations, Better Oral Health

Use these motivational interviewing (MI) strategies to talk about oral health with the person you support.



### MI Strategy for the Person You Support

Use an affirmation to encourage nutritious food choices.

#### Example:

“That was a good idea to add fruit to the grocery list.”



### MI Strategy for Guardian or Family Member

Use an affirmation to encourage a family member’s participation in oral health goals.

#### Example:

“Thanks for the suggestion to add vegetables as a pizza topping. We appreciate any input you have!”



### Adapting MI Strategies

Remember you don’t need to exaggerate.

## Next Steps

These are additional resources that will help you and the person you support keep thinking about this topic after your conversation is over:

- [Weekly Menu Plan Handout](#)
- [Decay & Nutrition Video](#)

