

# Controlling Dental Decay

Understanding the causes of dental decay and how it can be controlled gives us the power to control most decay in our mouths. Home care and lifestyle habits are key factors in preventing decay.

## What Causes Decay?

Sugar and refined carbohydrates are used by plaque bacteria, producing acids which attack the tooth. Acid attack may penetrate below the tooth surface, and some tooth minerals may be lost. Natural recovery (or remineralization) will usually replace much of the tooth mineral lost below the surface. This 'attack and recovery process' occurs every time you eat.

If the 'attack' outweighs the 'recovery' process over longer periods of time, the damage becomes visible and looks like 'white spots' on the teeth. 'White spots can often be seen on teeth along the gumline. If the acid damage continues a white spot becomes a hole in the tooth and becomes brown or black.

Fluoride (from water and toothpaste) assist the teeth in resisting the acid attack at the tooth surface, and provides extra protection by helping the natural recovery (or remineralisation) process.

To control and reverse dental decay takes some effort, but most gains can be made by developing a few routine habits in our lifestyle.

## "Why Does This Happen?"

### **Not enough fluoride.**

- in the water supply;
- in toothpaste
  - fluoride reduces decay
  - brushing helps remove plaque, reducing both gum infections and plaque acid.

All sources of fluoride help to prevent decay, repair any early decay and help to stop cavities from getting larger.

### **Frequent sugary snacks or drinks.**

Soft drinks, cordial and sports drinks, tea and coffee with sugar added, sweets and highly sugared snacks e.g. sweet biscuits, health bars.

### **Dry mouth, which may be caused by some medications (e.g. anti-depressants), drugs and extreme stress.**

Saliva helps to protect our teeth by diluting the acid that forms after eating. Dry mouth may increase the chances of tooth decay.

### **"What can I do to control decay?"**

Think about your lifestyle. Look for risk factors. Your dental professional can help you to find the main factors causing decay in your mouth and advise you on the steps you can take to control it.

### **Your teeth**

- Use toothpaste with fluoride.
- Brush your teeth twice a day.
- Your dental professional may advise you to 'spit, don't rinse'.
- After brushing, simply spit out the toothpaste and leave your mouth feeling fresh, instead of rinsing away your 'mini fluoride treatment'.
- If you have cavities or areas of early 'white spot' decay, your dental professional may recommend that you use fluoride mouthrinses or concentrated fluoride gels at home. A remineralizing product such as tooth mousse may be recommended. These are very effective in helping you control decay and prevent further damage.

### **Your diet**

#### **Healthy alternatives**

- Eat healthy regular meals.
- Limit between meal snacks, and make healthy choices such as fruit, cheese and nuts.
- Try not to substitute sweet snacks with high salt/ high fat snacks, as these may lead to other health problems.
- Choose artificially sweetened milk drinks instead of acidic soft drinks and sports drinks. Alternatives that taste good can be included within a well balanced healthy diet. Many soft drinks contain caffeine which is addictive, so if you find it difficult to reduce these, try coffee flavoured milk drinks.
- Drink fluoridated tap water where available, and use it for coffee, tea and in cooking.

#### **If your mouth feels dry...**

chewing sugar free gum will increase the saliva flow, and helps to distribute saliva to the hard to reach areas of your mouth.

Frequent sips of water will assist in washing away food acids and alleviate some of the discomfort of dry mouth. Dry mouth gels and saliva substitutes are available

Note: The use of sweetened drinks to relieve dryness may be particularly damaging, and should be avoided.

### Dental visits

- Visit your dental professional regularly for advice on keeping your teeth healthy.
- Your dental professional may advise you to make more frequent dental visits while you are controlling a decay problem. These visits are usually brief to check your progress while you are changing the balance between 'acid attack and recovery' in your mouth (your eating and brushing habits). Not every tooth surface will improve at the same rate as so it is important that you keep these appointments. Your dental professional will plan the visits to minimise the chance of further damage to your teeth if the home treatment plan needs to be modified.

### The Good News

If decay has already started, but is at an early stage ('white spot' - enamel damage) - i.e. a cavity has not yet formed - you can stop it becoming a cavity by using home care procedures. At your regular dental visit your dental professional will help you keep your teeth free of decay and fillings by:

- alerting you to signs of early decay.
- providing advice on how to stop it progressing;
- monitoring how successful you are in controlling it.

### Your Checklist

#### Avoid

- using a non fluoride toothpaste.
- frequent sweets and sticky snacks
- tea and coffee with sugar
- frequent soft drinks, cordial and sports drinks
- sucking sweets or lozenges if your mouth feels dry
- skipping regular tooth-brushing
- putting off dental visits

#### Good Habits

- healthy snacks - cheese , nuts, fruit
- limiting between meal snacks and drinks
- brushing teeth with fluoride toothpaste
- sip water if your mouth feels dry
- regular dental visits

It can take time to establish new brushing and eating habits , but it becomes easier as time goes on.

You will find the rewards are worth the effort.