

Riverside Dental Practice

Riverside **KIDS**



Dental Advice for Parents

With so much advice being given to parents from every corner regarding the health of their family it is easy to see how a concerned mother or father could feel snowed under. Dental health is no different and with advertisements on television, in magazines and on the radio it's often hard to know where to start.

By and large most children I see in private practice have, happily, very little wrong with their teeth and gums but when, in some cases, we notice a problem I am always very keen to get to the cause of the problem rather than merely treat the symptoms. It can come as a great relief for parents to learn some handy tips to avoiding dental decay and gum disease for their children.

Far and away the most common issue I see on a daily basis for child patients is the problem of dental decay. Dental decay is a process whereby a tooth surface is broken down by the acid by-products of bacteria present in everyone's natural oral flora. Once the tooth surface has been weakened by this process a cavity can form. At this stage it becomes very easy for more bacteria to gain access to the inside of the tooth and the process speeds up. The end result is the eventual spreading of the decay into the pulp space whereby the tooth dies and an infection results, causing pain and swelling.

The cause of dental decay is almost solely down to one source: Sugar. The bacteria that do the damage require that sugar is present before they become active.

It is not as a result of bad brushing habits or weak teeth or soft teeth that run in the family. The statistics over generations of studies all point to one main cause over and over again: Sugar. We, as parents, can take great comfort from this fact as the sugar intake of a child's diet is 100% controllable. Consequently dental decay, and the associated pain and trauma it can cause our children, is 100% preventable.

There are some issues that make early detection crucial, specifically for our child patients:



Decay progresses faster in deciduous(baby) teeth.

- Children's food can be highly flavoured and in many cases highly sugared.
- Deciduous teeth are smaller and so decay has less distance to travel until the pulp is reached.
- Children do not voluntarily arrange a dental appointment for themselves .
- Children, believe it or not, complain less than we do. A child may be in real pain with a tooth-ache that would have driven an adult to the dentist long before but will not mention it until the process has progressed too far to repair a tooth.

It is very important for me as a dentist to get across some vital facts to parents of a child with dental caries (decay). Firstly, as I have stated, the cause is almost always an excess consumption of sugary foods. However, as with most things in life, it is not as simple as that. More specifically the caries is present because of an excess of **FREQUENCY OF SUGAR**. It is not necessarily due to an excess quantity of sugar. A tooth can withstand a certain frequency of exposures to sugar and the acid that is then released by the acid-releasing bacteria that consume the sugar. This event is termed an **Acid Attack**. When we eat a sugar-containing food/drink 99.9% of it goes into our bellies(unfortunately!) but a residue is left on the surfaces of the teeth which is enough to activate the bacteria. These bacteria will release their acid for around half an hour until the body's natural defences restore the ph of the mouth back to normal. Then the natural defences will set about repairing any microscopic damage that has been done to the tooth surface. Our defences, unfortunately, can only cope with 3 or 4 acid attacks per day. That is where the **Frequency** becomes vital. A whole meal of sugary pancakes, orange juice, and desert crammed in to one half hour period counts as one acid attack. One boring digestive biscuit 1 hour later counts as 1 acid attack. A bowl of cereal counts the same as a mars bar. The food companies stress words like LOW SUGAR, NO ADDED SUGAR, REDUCED SUGAR. It doesn't matter for those bacteria in our mouths. They are microscopic. It's all just

sugar to them. Foods with **Zero** sugar do not activate the bacteria. With this in mind I always ask the parents to try a few key changes when setting about avoiding tooth decay:

- Count the acid attacks: Do a diet sheet for a standard school week and count up every single acid attack. From the big obvious deserts to the tiny sweet swopped in the yard. When you have a clear picture of this number you can then decide which acid attacks are important and which aren't.
- Cram the sugary foods together: Instead of putting the dinner on the table (which almost always has sugar in it somewhere) and allowing the gang to disappear outside with their friends straight away only to reappear an hour later for their desert (and another acid attack) try to remove the dinner plate and put down the desert/treat immediately. It doesn't count as a second acid attack if it's part of the same 30minute meal.
- Sort out the school lunches: Little break and Big break. Make one of these the acid attack break. Whether this is juice and an apple, raisins and biscuits it doesn't matter, the key is to cram the sugary things together and leave the other break completely sugar free eg. Cheese sandwich and crisps. Filling two separate small lunch boxes clearly marked takes the decision out of a child's hands.
- Sort out the drinks: The stream of advertising on this front is staggering with big juice companies vying for your business. Please remember the words above: No Added Sugar is still sugar. It will still cause decay if consumed at a high enough frequency. I always encourage my own two boys to have juice as it is part of a healthy diet but only at mealtimes. In between meals every active child will get thirsty but minerals and juices should not be used a thirst quencher. Milk or Water is the only approved drink for this.
- Put yourself back in charge of the food. Set down good house rules about food. No child should be allowed to help themselves to food whenever they want. All food requests should have to go through you. Put the sweets on the top shelf. These are good examples of rules that have worked for parents in order to get control of their child's seemingly impossible tooth decay problem.
- Between meal snacks: We all need a snack from time to time and this is even more important for our kids who burn up so much energy every day. Examples of Sugar Free snacks include: crisps, nuts, cheese, toast, popcorn, crackers, breads, croissants. Unfortunately there **is** sugar in the otherwise healthy yoghurts and fruits that really should be crammed in somewhere else.

- Encourage treats at mealtimes every day. A lot of parents who get a fright when they discover that their child requires some fillings have a knee jerk reaction to sweets. They immediately clamp down and a zero tolerance attitude can be adopted. This is unhelpful and will not last as the child eventually revert back to the original high sugar diet. Everyone deserves a treat sometimes and kids can feel very cheated when all their friends are talking about the new sweet or bar in the shops. I encourage my kids and my patients to have their treat after their dinner/lunch/both every day.
- Bring your children to the dentist for a regular check-up, do not wait for a problem. Many early cases of tooth decay can be treated by diet advice alone or simple non-invasive sealants but these will only be noticed by a dentist.

It is also a good idea to get your child used to the sights and sounds of a dental surgery and for them to meet the dentist and know him by his first name. If anything happens ie. toothache/accidental trauma it's always a much less stressful event for the child if they know Paul/Eoin can fix them up as opposed to a scary first time visit to the dentist when they are already distressed and in pain



I hope these few pointers help put to you in the right direction but if anyone has any questions about the issues raised please feel free to give me a call on 016102222 or send an email to poboyleriverside@hotmail.com.

- Dr. Paul O'Boyle, Riverside Dental Practice