



Tooth decay

This fact sheet explains tooth decay and its' causes. It also provides tips on how to reduce the risk of tooth decay for both adults and infants.

What is tooth decay?

Tooth decay, also known as dental caries, can lead to holes or damage to teeth. The first sign of tooth decay may be 'white spots' on the teeth, usually near the gum line. At this early stage, it is still possible to repair the damage through good oral hygiene and the use of fluoride products. If left untreated, a white spot may become a hole (cavity) which requires treatment by a dental practitioner.

What causes tooth decay?

Tooth decay can occur when the bacteria in dental plaque converts the sugars we eat into acid. The acid attacks the tooth surface (i.e. tooth enamel) causing minerals from the surface to be lost (demineralisation).

The body tries to naturally recover from this 'demineralisation' by absorbing the lost minerals into the mouth's saliva. Certain conditions and factors occurring in the mouth may assist these lost minerals to be re-absorbed back into the enamel (remineralisation). This 'attack and recovery' occurs every time you eat or drink.

Tooth decay will develop over a period of time, if the 'attack' outweighs the 'recovery'.

Factors that contribute to tooth decay

- Frequent eating and drinking of sugary foods and drinks can cause tooth decay.
- Inadequate levels of fluoride in our saliva can contribute to tooth decay. Drinking fluoridated water can help protect against decay. Fluoride in saliva binds with the minerals that have been lost from the tooth and helps remineralisation. Drinking fluoridated water provides a continual source of fluoride to the saliva. As most people only brush twice a day, fluoride toothpaste does not supply a continual source of fluoride to the mouth.
- A dry mouth increases the risk of tooth decay. Saliva helps protect teeth by acting as a reservoir for fluoride and also by diluting acids.

What should I do to reduce the risk of tooth decay?

- Follow the Australian Dietary Guidelines and enjoy a healthy diet.
- Limit sugary and acidic foods and drinks.
- Choose healthy snacks like fruits, cheese and vegetables.
- Brush teeth and along the gum line twice a day with a soft toothbrush and fluoride toothpaste. Spit out excess toothpaste after brushing but do not rinse.
- Drink plenty of tap water.



- Chew sugar-free gum to increase saliva.
- Ask your dental practitioner how often you need to visit for a check-up.

Infants and tooth decay

Decay causing bacteria are not present in the mouths of newborn babies. The bacteria can be passed to the baby from a parent or carer.

It is important that parents and others close to the baby do not expose the baby to the bacteria. The best ways to make sure this does not happen is for parents and carers to have healthy mouths themselves and for every member of the family to have their own toothbrush.

Baby teeth usually erupt between six months and two years of age. Infants can be at risk of tooth decay as soon as their baby teeth erupt. Tooth decay in infants is sometimes referred to as 'early childhood caries' or 'baby bottle decay'.

Feeding a baby with bottles containing sweet drinks such as fruit juice, cordial or soft drink, or giving dummies that have been dipped in sweet flavourings such as honey, jam or syrup can cause early childhood caries.

To avoid early childhood caries, follow these tips:

- Breast milk is best for babies and does not increase the risk of tooth decay.
- If you use a bottle for a baby under 12 months of age, put only breast milk, formula or water in it.
- Introduce an infant feeding cup at around six months of age.
- Stop using a bottle at around 12 months of age.
- Discourage comfort sucking by taking the bottle away once the baby is finished drinking and do not put baby to bed with a bottle.
- Never put anything on a baby's dummy to flavour it.
- As soon as your baby's teeth appear, clean them twice a day with a small soft toothbrush. Introduce children's fluoride toothpaste once they are 18 months of age.
- Children should have a check-up by the age of 2 years.

Remember

Tooth decay is a preventable disease, for both children and adults.

For more information

- Contact your dental practitioner
- Visit www.health.qld.gov.au/oralhealth
- Call 13 HEALTH (13 43 25 84) for confidential health advice 24 hours a day, seven days a week
- Email oral_health@health.qld.gov.au