

Sugar Shock: Limiting Sugar Intake for the Sake of Oral Health is Tougher Than it Sounds

Most of us are aware we need to limit sugary foods for the sake of our teeth. The task is easier said than done because willpower is sometimes on short order, and because sugar shows up in some surprising places.

It's not shocking that dentists recommend controlling your intake of soft, sweet foods like candy, cakes and cookies. Some sources of sugar, however, aren't as obvious.

Carbohydrates found in crackers, breads and even pizza quickly break down into sugar and, as far as your mouth is concerned, can have an impact similar to sugary treats. Other seemingly healthy foods such as raisins and other dried fruits spend more time in your mouth because they're sticky and hard to chew, leaving more time for sugars to do their damage.

According to Dr. Max Anderson, an oral health advisor for Delta Dental Plans Association, "Hundreds of types of bacteria live in the human mouth. Specific cavity-causing organisms feed on sugar and turn it into acid, which attacks tooth enamel and causes tooth decay."

Dr. Anderson recommends reading labels closely to understand just how much sugar you're putting into your mouth. Keep an eye out for ingredients like white or brown sugar, honey, molasses and syrups, as well as for ingredients with names like fructose, sucrose, glucose, corn syrup and maltose. All are various forms of sugar.

When it's time to reach for a snack, consider healthier choices like cheese, yogurt, fruit and nuts. When sugary or carbohydrate-rich foods are on the menu, eating them in combination with other foods is better than eating them alone. The body produces more saliva to help digest larger meals, which washes away more food and helps neutralize harmful acids before they can attack teeth.

"It's not realistic to banish sugar and carbohydrates from your diet, but understanding their sources and following a program of good oral hygiene can help counteract sugar's effects," says Dr. Anderson. "It's always a good idea to brush after meals and snacks at least twice a day, floss at least once a day, and visit your dentist regularly. When a toothbrush isn't handy, try flushing sugar from teeth by drinking a glass of water or chewing sugarless gum, particularly those with xylitol on the label."