



Sugars and Tooth Decay

What is tooth decay?

Tooth decay (= dental caries or dental cavities) are holes or cavities in the top layer of the teeth known as the enamel. They occur as a result of eating and drinking too much **sugar**.

What causes tooth decay?

Bacteria can be found inside the mouth within a substance called plaque, a thin white film covering the teeth. The **sugar** that we consume reacts with these bacteria to produce **acid**. The acid that is produced gradually dissolves the enamel causing dental caries.

How common is tooth decay?

Tooth decay remains one of the most common health issues in the UK, second only to the common cold. It is estimated **1 in 3 adults** suffer from tooth decay and close to **1 in 4 children** suffer from some sort of tooth decay.

Who is at risk?

Everyone is potentially at risk of tooth decay, but children and adolescents are most at risk. Dental caries are the most common cause of tooth loss among young people.

Other major risk factors include:

- ✓ *Plaque build-up due to ineffective brushing of teeth.*
- ✓ *Diets that are high in sugars.*
- ✓ *Consuming sticky, sugary foods.*
- ✓ *Drinking sugar-sweetened beverages, fruit juices or smoothies.*
- ✓ *Social factors e.g. smoking.*

What is the role of sugar?

Sugar in food and drinks plays a major role in the development of dental caries, and research has shown there is a **direct link** between them. Not only does the amount of sugar have an impact but also the frequency. In other words, if you eat and drink sugar daily or with every meal, it means your teeth are under almost constant attack from these destructive acids.

Consequences of dental caries:

- ✓ *Discomfort and pain*
- ✓ *Fractured tooth*
- ✓ *Inability to bite down on tooth*
- ✓ *Tooth abscess*
- ✓ *Tooth sensitivity*
- ✓ *Tooth loss*

How to prevent tooth decay:

The good news is you can prevent the formation of dental caries – simply by modifying your diet to eat and drink less sugar. It is recommended

that you consume **no more than 7 teaspoons/cubes of sugar (=30g)** per day and when you do consume sugar, try to do it during mealtimes so that you allow your teeth to be cleaned by water and saliva rather than snacking.



Other things you can do to prevent caries are:

- ✓ *Practising good oral hygiene – brushing your teeth at least twice a day and flossing daily.*
- ✓ *Avoiding chewy or sticky foods and sugary drinks*
- ✓ *Using fluoride toothpaste.*

Key points:

- **Sugars play a big part in causing dental caries.**
- **Reducing sugars in our diets helps prevent the formation of dental caries.**

Tips on how to eat less sugar:

- 1. Cut down gradually on the amount of sugars you add to your food and drink.**
- 2. Remove sugar, syrup and honey from the table.**
- 3. Instead of adding sugar to food like cereal or yoghurt, try fresh fruit.**
- 4. When baking, cut the sugar in your recipe by one third to one half.**
- 5. Instead of adding sugar in recipes, try adding almonds, vanilla, orange or lemon.**
- 6. Buy sugar-free, low-calorie drinks.**
- 7. Compare the sugars content of different foods and choose the lower calorie option.**
- 8. Use [FoodSwitch UK](http://www.foodswitch.org.uk) to help you find food and drink with less sugar.**