

# Looking after your teeth

## Information for adults

### Other formats

If you need this information in another format such as audio tape or computer disk, Braille, large print, high contrast, British Sign Language or translated into another language, please telephone the PALS desk on 01271 314090.

### Introduction

This leaflet aims to provide basic information on how to take care of your teeth and gums.

### Cause of decay

Tooth decay occurs when bacteria in the mouth break down sugar to cause an acid attack, which then dissolves the teeth.

sugar + bacteria (plaque) = acid

acid + enamel + number of acid attacks = decay

Evidence shows that, the more often you have sugar in your mouth, the more likely you are to get tooth decay.

Brushing your teeth with a fluoride toothpaste can protect your teeth.

### Choose the right fluoride toothpaste

You should be using a family toothpaste which contains at least 1350ppm of fluoride. This will be marked on the tube.

For people at higher risk of tooth decay, a high dose fluoride toothpaste or mouthrinse may be prescribed by your dentist if appropriate.

Your dentist may also apply fluoride varnish to your teeth.

### Toothbrushing

- Choose a toothbrush with a head no bigger than a pound coin, or choose an electric brush.
- Do not wet the toothbrush before cleaning.



***'Brush last thing at night and one other time with a fluoride toothpaste'***

- You should spit out and not rinse after brushing. Leaving the fluoride toothpaste in the mouth will help to strengthen teeth.
- If gums bleed when brushing, this shows that more thorough brushing is required. Do not stop brushing.
- Make sure you brush your teeth up to the gum twice a day for 2-3 minutes. This should be last thing at night, and at one other time of day.
- Brushing last thing at night will especially help to protect the teeth, as fluoride in the toothpaste continues to work when you are asleep.
- Replace your toothbrush when it shows signs of wear, or at least every 3 months.
- Do not share toothbrushes.
- Floss or interdental brushes clean between the teeth where the toothbrush cannot reach. Your dental staff can show you how to do this effectively.

***'Spit, don't  
rinse'***

## Food, snacks and drinks

Lots of sugar in our diet comes from biscuits, cakes, sweets, chocolate, drinks and breakfast cereals.

Sugary foods and drinks between meals can damage teeth. Try to keep these to mealtimes only.

Sugar is named in many ways on food labels including glucose, fructose, maltose, sucrose, maltodextrin, honey and many others. Look at the nutritional information label, which will explain how much of the food is sugars.

***'Avoid sugary  
food and drinks  
between meals'***

## Some healthy snacks ideas

**Bread:** Toast, crumpets, pitta bread, baps and rolls.

**Fresh fruit:** apples, pears, bananas, grapes, kiwis, strawberries, blueberries, and lots more. **Be very careful with dried fruit** as they are very sugary; keep them to meals.

**Vegetables:** Celery, carrot, cucumber, peppers & lots more.

**Dairy:** Plain dairy yogurt (good with fresh fruit), a matchbox-size portion of low fat cheese.

**Drinks:** Still water (not fizzy) is good between meals. So is cow's or goat's milk. Tea and coffee without sugar (or with an artificial sweetener like xylitol or Stevia) are also fine.

Keep any other drinks to mealtimes. Even the 'no added sugar', low sugar or natural sugar drinks can cause decay. Flavoured water can also be acidic.

Non-dairy milks and yoghurts often have added sugar – check the label.

## Sugar free medicines

Unfortunately some medicines contain sugar, which can cause tooth decay if given frequently for long periods of time.

Check with your doctor or pharmacist to see if a sugar-free alternative is available.

## Smoking and alcohol

Smoking is harmful to your teeth and mouth. Stained teeth and bad breath can affect your social life. Decay, severe gum disease leading to loss of the teeth and oral cancer are much more common in people who smoke. This includes smokeless tobacco like paan, chewing tobacco, gutkha and shisha pipes. It is currently unclear whether 'vaping' is less harmful than smoking.

Smoking not only makes it much more likely that you will get gum disease, but also makes gum disease less likely to improve with treatment.

If you want to stop smoking, contact your dentist or free Smokefree National Helpline on 0300 123 1044.

Taking a lot of alcohol can cause tooth wear, because alcoholic drinks are often acidic. Alcohol intake increases the risk of oral cancer.

## Medical conditions

Being diabetic increases your risk of getting gum disease. Also, poor gum health can lead to blood sugar control problems for people with diabetes.

Many medications can cause your mouth to become dry due to lack of saliva. This can increase the risk of tooth decay.

Many health conditions can impact on the health of your mouth. It is important to see your dentist regularly to avoid problems.

## Visit your dentist regularly

It is important for you to visit your dentist as often as they advise. They will check your teeth and gums to make sure they are healthy.

To find a local NHS dentist, call 03330 063 300, or email [accessdentalhelpline@nhs.net](mailto:accessdentalhelpline@nhs.net)

## Useful contact

**Exeter NHS Dental Access Centre**  
RD&E Hospital (Heavitree)  
Gladstone Road  
Exeter  
EX1 2ED  
Tel: 01392 405700

**Barnstaple NHS Dental Access Centre**  
Barnstaple Health Centre  
Vicarage Street  
Barnstaple  
EX32 7BH  
Tel: 01271 370562

## **PALS**

The Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS) ensures that the NHS listens to patients, relatives, carers and friends, answers questions and resolves concerns as quickly as possible. If you have a query or concern call 01271 314090 or e-mail [ndht.pals@nhs.net](mailto:ndht.pals@nhs.net). You can also visit the PALS and Information Centre in person at North Devon District Hospital, Barnstaple.

## **Have your say**

Northern Devon Healthcare NHS Trust aims to provide high quality services. However, please tell us when something could be improved. If you have a comment or compliment about a service or treatment, please raise your comments with a member of staff or the PALS team in the first instance.

'Care Opinion' comments forms are on all wards or online at [www.careopinion.org.uk](http://www.careopinion.org.uk).

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