

# Fact Sheet

Academy of General Dentistry

## Nourishing Your Smile

### How does what I eat affect my oral health?

You may be able to prevent two of the most common diseases of modern civilization, tooth decay (caries) and periodontal disease, simply by improving your diet.

Decay results when the hard tissues are destroyed by acid products from oral bacteria. Certain foods and food combinations are linked to higher levels of cavity-causing bacteria. Although poor nutrition does not directly cause periodontal disease, many researchers believe that the disease progresses faster and is more severe in patients whose diet does not supply the necessary nutrients. Periodontal disease affects the supporting tissues of the teeth and is the leading cause of tooth loss in adults.

Poor nutrition affects the entire immune system, thereby increasing susceptibility to many disorders. People with lowered immune systems have been shown to be at higher risk for periodontal disease. Additionally, today's research shows a link between oral health and systemic conditions, such as diabetes and cardiovascular disease. So eating a variety of foods as part of a well-balanced diet may not only improve your dental health, but increasing fiber and vitamin intake may reduce the risk of other diseases.

### How can I plan my meals and snacks to promote better oral health?

Eat a well-balanced diet characterized by moderation and variety. Develop eating habits that follow the recommendations from reputable health organizations such as The American Dietetic Association and The National Institutes of Health. Choose foods from the four basic food groups: fruits and vegetables, breads and cereals, milk and dairy products, meat, chicken, fish or beans. Avoid fad diets that limit or eliminate entire food groups which usually result in vitamin or mineral deficiencies.

Always keep your mouth moist by drinking lots of water. Saliva protects both hard and soft oral tissues. If you have a dry mouth, supplement your diet with sugarless candy or gum to stimulate saliva.

Foods that cling to your teeth promote tooth decay. So when you snack, avoid soft, sweet, sticky foods, such as cakes, candy and dried fruits. Instead, choose dentally healthy foods such as nuts, raw vegetables, plain yogurt, cheese and sugarless gum or candy.

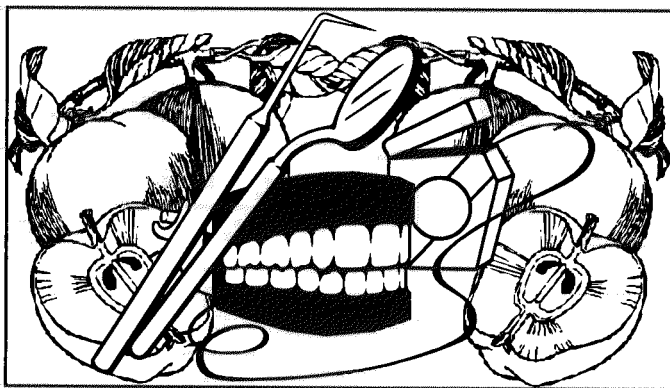
When you eat fermentable carbohydrates, such as crackers, cookies and chips, eat them as part of your meal, instead of by themselves. Combinations of foods neutralize acids in the mouth and inhibit tooth decay. For example, enjoy cheese with your crackers. Your snack will be just as satisfying and better for your dental health.

One caution: malnutrition (bad nutrition) can result from too much nourishment as easily as too little. Each time you eat, you create an environment for oral bacteria to develop. Additionally,

studies are showing that dental disease is just as related to overeating as heart disease, obesity, diabetes and hypertension. So making a habit of eating too much of just about anything, too frequently, should be avoided.

### When should I consult my dentist or dietitian about my nutritional status?

Always ask your dentist if you're not sure how your nutrition (diet) may affect your oral health. Conditions such as tooth loss, pain, or joint dysfunction can impair chewing and are often found in elderly people, those on restrictive diets and those who are undergoing medical treatment. People experiencing these problems may be too isolated or weakened to eat nutritionally balanced meals at a time when it is particularly critical. Talk to your dental health professional about what you can do for yourself or someone you know in these circumstances.



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Sources: "Diet and Dental Health," by Connie Mobley, PhD, RD, and Michael W. Dodds, DDS, PhD, *Topics in Nutrition*, 1999; Warren B. Karp, PhD, DMD, "Nutritional Update for the Dental Health Professional," *CDA Journal*, 1999; "Modern Nutrition in Health and Disease," ninth edition; Williams and Wilkins 1999; The California Dental Association.