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Back to school, back to school lunches. What does it mean for your child's teeth?

According to the U.S. Surgeon General, dental decay is the single most common chronic childhood disease affecting America's school children, five times more common than asthma and seven times more common than hay fever. The U.S. Surgeon General's Report on Oral Health states that nearly one in six children over age 5 has a cavity--by age 17, nearly eight in 10 have dental decay. According to U.S. Government Accountability Office data, dental problems result in nearly 51 million hours of missed school time each year.

How do the foods a child eats cause cavities?

Plaque is the sticky, colorless film of bacteria that forms on everyone's teeth daily. After your child eats, the bacteria in plaque produce acids. Constantly bathing the teeth in sweetened beverages and snacks high in sugar is like providing an all-you-can eat buffet for the bacteria to mass produce acids in your child's mouth. With time, these acids destroy the tooth enamel and tooth decay occurs.

Must I eliminate sugar completely from my child's diet?

No. But limit the amount of sweets, sweetened beverages and sticky, gooey foods (candy, crackers, processed fruit snacks). At a minimum, teach your child to eat sugary snacks only with other food, so the saliva will help neutralize plaque acids. In addition, teach your child to drink water or brush her teeth after eating foods or drinks high in sugars.

Tips to keep your child's teeth healthy during school:

- Pack healthy lunches, with items that are healthy and fun to eat (yogurt, string cheese, or carrot sticks)
- Restrict your child's eating of foods like candy, potato chips, juices and sodas, that are bad for her teeth and overall health. Those foods should be for special occasions
- Encourage your child to brush after lunch and after snack time, if possible. If not, then when he gets home.
- Have your child drink more water.
- Brush your child's teeth at least twice daily and floss daily, especially at bedtime
- Sealants, applied to the chewing surface of teeth, provide support in the fight against dental decay in many young children. Eighty percent of the decay in school children is on the chewing surface.
- Visit your pediatric dentist at least every six months

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