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Milk's Benefits for Oral Health in Children

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Got milk? Thanks to high-profile marketing, there is widespread recognition of the benefits of milk for maintaining healthy bones and teeth. However, with the current abundance of beverage choices labeled with vitamins added and their benefits, it is not surprising that such a familiar item as plain milk can be taken for granted. This has not been the case for the scientific community. In fact, it is actually quite extraordinary to consider the scope and diversity of research conducted over the past fifty years on this everyday drink.

There is a good deal of current research on the benefits of milk on oral health for children. Of course, it is well-known that milk includes calcium and added vitamin D, both of which together are critical to the development of strong bones and teeth. However, recent studies also show that milk and other dairy products contain many other compounds that prevent cavities when combined with good oral hygiene. The results of those studies can be organized into three important factors: milk can help (1) rebuild teeth, (2) prevent bacteria from sticking to teeth, and (3) inhibit plaque formation.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, when infant formulas, juices, sweetened drinks, and plain milk are compared, plain milk emerges as the best drink for preventing cavities. However, even milk cannot be relied upon to prevent cavities without good oral hygiene. Indeed, milk has lactose. Since lactose is a type of fermentable sugar, cavities can still be formed from milk consumption if the lactose is allowed to remain in the mouth. This is especially true for nursing, sippy-cup drinking, or bottle-feeding children who drink continuously throughout the day, at night, or right before going to sleep. Therefore, it is generally advised that any infant or child should have their gums and teeth brushed twice per day, and certainly before going to sleep.

Regular milk drinkers enjoy other oral health benefits. They seem to have less gingivitis (gum inflammation) and periodontitis (bone loss) than children that do not drink milk regularly. Other properties of milk have prompted some suggestions for its use as artificial saliva for those suffering from dry mouth. In some parts of the world, fluoride is added to milk. Where this is done, studies show a great reduction of cavities in children.

In the end, milk is just one part of a total approach to oral hygiene in children.

This article first appeared in the July 2006 issue of West Coast Magazine.