

Children's Diet and Dental Health

Forward

Good family education is a gateway to a healthy life of your child. With this in mind, we have created this booklet for you and your child who is six months to five years old.

I hope that this booklet can help you recognise the relationship between diet and dental health, help your child develop a regular dietary habit, thereby promoting his/her dental health.

Balanced diet

A balanced diet can provide sufficient energy and nutrients to the body, assist in bone growth and tooth development, and maintain good health. This is especially important for newborn babies and their entire growing stage.

In the first six months after birth, children only feed on breast milk or formula milk. At about six months, babies start eating semi-solid food to meet their increased nutritional needs. Upon introducing solid foods, parents should give their babies food of various textures and flavours, including grains, vegetables, melons, fruits, meats, eggs, dried beans and bean products. Not only will it help children get a balanced amount of nutrients, but it will also introduce them to eating a variety of foods to reduce picky eating.

At about two years old when children are used to eating a variety of nutritious foods, most children will have a variety of food choices together with their families, but foods of high salt, high fat and high sugar content should be limited. By following the healthy eating food pyramid as below, their diet can just be similar to adults.



Eat less fat / oil, salt and sugar

Eat moderate amount of milk, meat, fish, egg and alternatives

Eat more vegetables and fruits

Eat most grains

For more information about healthy eating for young children, please visit the website of Family Health Service: <https://www.fhs.gov.hk/english/>

An unbalanced diet leads to malnutrition, which impedes physical development and delays the growth and development of teeth. Children who have long been sick may have colour or structural changes in the developing tooth germs, or developmental defects in the enamel. Such teeth are more prone to tooth decay if they are not properly taken care of. In addition, if children are prescribed tetracycline during the development of the teeth, the tetracycline may deposit in the developing teeth, making the teeth yellowish or grayish blue in colour, thereby affecting appearance.

Avoid frequent eating and drinking

There is a layer of bacteria-rich dental plaque on the tooth surfaces. The bacteria in the plaque metabolise the sugars in food to produce acids, which causes the loss of minerals from the tooth surfaces. Nevertheless, saliva can neutralise acids and protect our teeth.

However, it takes time for saliva to neutralise the acids. If children eat and drink too frequently, saliva cannot adequately neutralise the excess acids, the continuous depletion of minerals from the tooth surfaces will eventually result in the formation of tooth decay.

Develop a good dietary habit

To effectively prevent tooth decay, good dietary habits are of paramount importance. By taking meals regularly, limiting snacks (those foods or drinks that are consumed outside regular meals and teatime) can reduce the number of times the teeth being attacked by acids, thus reducing the chance of tooth decay.

For the sake of your children's dental health, please bear in mind the following three principles of healthy eating:

1. Give your children breakfast, lunch and dinner that are adequate in amount and balanced in nutrition every day.
2. If your children still feel like eating after meals, you can try to increase the amount of food in the meal. Nutritious refreshment can be provided once between meals if needed.
3. Only allow your children to drink water in between meals.

Tips on taking care of your children's diet

Question: My baby is ten months old and has five teeth. I give him milk three times a day, congee twice and one refreshment (such as baby biscuits and rice cereal), occasionally I will let him try my dinner food. Is there any problem with this?

Answer: Every time we eat, we put our teeth at risk of being attacked by acids and increase the chance of having tooth decay. Therefore, if you want your baby to try your food, you can arrange his dinner time same as yours, this can avoid increasing the number of times your baby eats.

By the same token, whenever parents eat or drink other than the regular mealtimes, they should not share with the baby. Even a bite of potato chip, a mouthful of ice cream or a sip of soft drinks, is enough to put him at extra risk of having tooth decay!

Question: I let my baby drink juice, is such drink causing any harm to my baby's teeth?

Answer: The sugar in the juice is the raw material for bacteria in the dental plaque to produce acids. Frequent consumption of such drinks has a bad influence on the teeth.

For the sake of your baby's teeth, limit such drinks as far as possible, and don't replace water by juice or sugary drinks. If it is really necessary, you can make it part of your baby's regular meal, for example, let the baby drink right after the mealtime.

Question: Children like to eat snacks, what should I do?

Answer: Whether the snacks are sweet (such as candies, chocolate, sweet biscuits, cakes, ice cream, etc.), salty (such as potato chips, prawn crackers, etc.) or sour (such as dried plum, prune, etc.), they have an adverse effect on the health of the body and teeth. In fact, the nutritional value of snacks is generally low. In addition, snacking also affects the children's appetite, and increases the intake of excess oil, salt, sugar, thus making them more prone to getting tooth decay. Therefore, we should not let children develop the habit of eating snacks.

Instead, you may spend more effort on cooking a variety of foods of different styles and flavour, with sufficient quantities and balanced nutrition for breakfast, lunch and dinner. At the same time, be a good role model for children and refrain from snacks. In addition, prepare a nutritious snack for children in the morning and afternoon which cater for their growth needs and reduce the consumption of junk food. If you allow your children to nibble, you can ask them to eat right after meals or during teatime.

Question: My parents often reward my five-year-old daughter with snacks. What should I do if my daughter keeps nibbling?

Answer: Adults often reward their children with snacks, which can have adverse consequences. When children get the snacks, they will eat them anytime they like. When they keep nibbling, they are prone to ingest excess oil, salt and sugar, which will affect their health and greatly increase their chances of having tooth decay. Of course, the most ideal is to teach your daughter not to eat snacks. But this is often easier said than done. In order not to disappoint your daughter, you can teach her to collect the snacks she receives in a snack bag or a snack box and enjoy them at teatime. At the same time, you can give suggestions to your parents on some alternative ways to reward her, such as giving stickers, stationery, educational toys, books, or taking her to visit friends, going to the park, library or museums, etc.

Question: My son eats regularly on school days, but on holiday or his birthday, he eats and drinks when he wants. What should I do?

Answer: It is understandable that the mealtimes could become irregular during holiday or birthday. But as long as you remind your son to adhere to the principle of eating not more than five to six times a day, and more importantly, help your son return to the normal eating pattern afterwards, it is still acceptable. You should make him understand the benefits of eating regularly on his teeth.

Question: My daughter is twenty-eight months old. She does not like eating regular meals, and occasionally she wants to drink milk. She likes eating snacks such as biscuits, cakes, chips and candies any time. How can I improve her diet condition?

Answer: Your daughter has no habit of eating regular meals and the food she eats is not balanced in variety and nutrition. Frequent and uncontrolled eating of high-calorie snacks such as biscuits, cakes, chips, candies, etc. can affect her appetite for regular meals. To alleviate the situation, you can start developing a good dietary habit with her. You can record the type, quantity, time, etc. of what your daughter eats and drinks (Please refer to the Children's Dietary Record), and then set a timely eating schedule for your daughter. Try to reduce one snack time at the beginning, and gradually reduce the frequency of eating and drinking. The ultimate goal is to allow three meals a day and no more than two refreshment times.

As for a balanced diet, you can design some recipes with different styles and flavors to attract her to eat. For example, you can cut bread, fruit, etc. into different shapes

