



Healthy DIET,



Healthy TEETH

How the foods and drinks your children consume can affect their oral health

BY JENNIFER MARINO WALTERS

February is National Children's Dental Health Month, and this year's theme is "Water: Nature's Drink." We all know that drinking enough water is important for our health, but how much does it really have to do with teeth? A lot, it turns out.

"The diet is among the leading causes of tooth decay in children," says Dr. Srotalina Khanna, a dentist at Bethesda Family Smiles. "Sugary foods and drinks can cause damage to the teeth that become decay and cavities."

When these sugary items sit on the surface of teeth for extended periods of time, bacteria develop around them. The bacteria eat away at the enamel and create holes, or cavities, in the teeth. Cavities can cause pain and infections as well as speech, eating and learning problems.

Unfortunately, cavities are among the most common chronic childhood

diseases in the U.S. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, about 20% of children ages 5 to 11 and 13% of adolescents ages 12 to 19 have at least one untreated cavity.

That is why it is best to have your child drink water instead of sugary juices and sodas. Tap water containing fluoride also makes teeth stronger and protects them from decay. You can find out if your water has enough fluoride—the optimal amount is 0.7 milligrams per liter—by visiting

nccd.cdc.gov/doh_mwf. (If it doesn't have enough, ask your child's dentist if he or she should take fluoride supplements.)

You should also have your child avoid foods that contain excess sugars, such as candy, cookies and other sweets. Be extra careful with sticky foods like dried fruits and fruit snacks, which tend to stay on teeth longer than other types of food. The best diet for your kids' health—and their teeth—is a varied one that includes lean meats and fish, whole grains, cheese, yogurt, fruits and vegetables.

But let's be honest—the chances of eliminating sugary foods and drinks altogether are pretty slim. So, it's best to

pediatric practice because the dentist and hygienist have experience working with kids and making them feel comfortable.

Kristin Fuerst, a Maryland mom of two, says her kids actually get excited to go to their pediatric dentist.

"The environment is inviting, and the staff is kid-centric. They show movies and they give great prizes," says Fuerst.

Encourage proper brushing

Although the average person brushes for 45 seconds, the proper brushing time is two minutes, twice a day (morning and evening). Khanna suggests using a timer or singing a two-minute song to ensure your



feed these items to your children alongside or shortly after meals. Saliva production increases during meals, which helps to rinse away food particles and eliminate acids produced by bacteria.

Proper oral hygiene and dental care can also help to keep your kids' teeth healthy. You can also take the following measures:

Start early

Wipe your baby's gums with a soft, clean cloth twice a day, in the morning and right before bed.

Visit the dentist regularly

Take your child to the dentist every six months as soon as he or she turns 1 year old or the first tooth appears. "This will develop good oral hygiene habits and get kids comfortable learning how to brush and floss at home," says Khanna.

It's a good idea to find a family or

child brushes long enough. Try to make sure that time is divided evenly among all of the areas of the mouth. Use a brush with soft bristles to protect your child's sensitive gums, and be sure to help until he or she is ready to brush alone.

Generally, it's best to use a nonfluoride toothpaste until your child turns 2, then switch to one with fluoride. Use toothpaste and mouthwash with flavors or characters that appeal to your child so he or she will be less likely to resist.

"I rotate the flavors so my kids get excited to try something new, which makes them actually want to brush," says Fuerst.

Remember that kids who develop good oral hygiene habits when they're young are more likely to continue those habits into adulthood. Taking care of your children's teeth now—even if they still have their baby teeth—will also help to protect their teeth in the future. ■

