

Sweets and teeth

From the sweeties.net wiki

The link between sweets and tooth decay is real, but it is not simply a matter of how many sweets you eat. When you eat them, and how you look after your teeth, matter too.

How sugar causes decay

The NHS explains that tooth decay happens when bacteria create a sticky layer called plaque over your teeth, which damages the surface of the teeth over time. The bacteria feed on sugar and make acid, and teeth can be under attack from that acid for up to an hour after eating sugar. The NHS says tooth decay is often caused by having too much sugary food and drink and not cleaning your teeth and gums regularly.

How often matters

Because each sugary snack starts a new acid attack, decay depends heavily on how often your teeth meet sugar. That is why dental advice is to keep sweets and sugary drinks to mealtimes, rather than grazing through the day.

Sticky sweets add to the problem, because the longer sugar stays on the teeth, the longer the bacteria can feed on it: see [why do sweets stick to your teeth?](#)

The Swedish experiment

Some of the evidence comes from the Vipeholm experiments in Sweden, which produced enough data to link sugar to tooth decay. At Vipeholm Hospital in Lund, a hospital for people with intellectual disabilities, patients were given large amounts of sweets between 1947 and 1949, including extra sticky toffee made specially so that it would cling to the teeth, to see whether sugar caused decay. The study led to the advice that it was better for children's teeth to eat sweets once a week than a smaller amount spread over the week, the origin of Sweden's Saturday sweets. Today the experiments are considered to have broken several principles of medical ethics: see [what is Swedish pick and mix?](#)

Looking after your teeth

The NHS advises:

- brush your teeth at least twice a day with fluoride toothpaste, and spit after brushing rather than rinsing
- clean between your teeth every day with floss or interdental brushes
- do not have too much sugary food or drink

- have regular dental check ups, as often as your dentist advises

What about sugar free sweets?

Sugar free sweets are often made with sugar alcohols, such as sorbitol, maltitol and xylitol. Sugar alcohols are not fed on by the bacteria in the mouth, so they do not contribute to tooth decay. Claims that xylitol actively prevents decay are less certain: a 2015 Cochrane review found some benefit from xylitol toothpaste but not enough evidence to judge other xylitol products. And sugar alcohols have a drawback: see [why do sugar free sweets carry a laxative warning?](#)

For children and braces, see [can you eat sweets with braces?](#)

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