

Ask Dr. Huff....



Kevin D. Huff, D.D.S.

Do I get cavities because my teeth are soft?

Dental caries, the disease that causes tooth decay, is caused by bacteria that are normally present in the mouth to help with the body's digestive processes. The main germ that causes dental caries is *Streptococcus mutans*, which is very similar to the germ that causes strep throat. When fed by sugars, these "bugs" produce a

substance called lactic acid as a waste product. Lactic acid causes breakdown of the enamel of teeth through a chemical process called demineralization. It is produced by *S. mutans* for at least a half of an hour after all sugars and starches have left the mouth. Since many of our daily habits include slowly sipping or snacking on sugary or starchy foods at regular intervals throughout the day (including coffee with cream and sugar, iced tea, candy bars, some fruits and vegetables, breads, crackers, etc.), it is not uncommon for our teeth to be subject to the acids that cause decay for most of the day. If we do not brush and floss very efficiently at least twice a day, our teeth may never be rescued from lactic acid!

Because we all carry these bacteria in our mouths, everyone is at risk for cavities. No one has "soft teeth", but some people are very susceptible to dental disease. Since fluoride helps to repair the areas of decay that are started and makes the surfaces between the teeth more resistant to acid attack, those who do not live in

fluoridated communities are even more at risk. Since the area around rough or aged fillings is a good breeding ground for bacteria, those with a lot of large, older fillings are even at a greater risk for developing cavities.

A good indicator if you are at risk for decay is if you regularly have bleeding gums when you brush or notice a thick, soft film around the gumline of your teeth, called plaque. Saliva is a natural buffer that helps to neutralize lactic acid. Since many older patients are on medications that cause dry mouth as a side effect and often have very old, large fillings, our senior citizens are at a very high risk for dental caries. By far, the two highest risk categories of people for getting cavities are children and seniors.

Never fear! There is hope to reduce your risk factor. By far, our best defense is meticulous home hygiene with proper brushing techniques at least twice a day. Topical and systemic fluoride have greatly reduced the incidence of dental caries today, but by far the greatest reduction in dental

caries during the past several decades is the treatment of public water facilities with 1 part per million of fluoride.

Dentists will often make suggestions on how you can improve your brushing techniques and offer both in-office fluoride therapy as well as at-home fluoride gels. Sometimes we also may prescribe an antibiotic mouthwash in combination with fluoride treatment help stop dental decay. Often, when we fill teeth, we use products that slowly release fluoride into the surrounding teeth as the fillings age. Since decay is a relatively slow process but is very destructive before it ever causes any pain, regular dental check-ups and x-rays are very important to help minimize decay.

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