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Hallowe'en Candy Can do Scary Things to Kids' Teeth

Hallowe'en candy can do scary things to kid's teeth. A US public health report (2005) revealed that 42% of children in kindergarten have cavities; an Ontario study (2004) found that 96% of children ages 7 to 13 had one or more past or active cavities. These numbers have been rising steadily over the past decade and dentists are concerned.

Though candy and other sweets are obvious culprits, "sugar is present in most of the food and beverages we ingest, including food like potato chips that contain modified starches," says Dr. Christine Botchway, an Edmonton dentist. "Even healthy snacks like fruit juice and apples contain sugar, so it is important that teeth are cleaned or mouths rinsed with water after eating."

Failure to remove sugars means that the acidity in the mouth is increased for up to two hours after eating sugary food, leaving the teeth and gums vulnerable to bacteria. This can result in the enamel of the teeth breaking down and causing cavities.

"So you are better off letting your child have a bunch of candy all at once than having one candy every three hours," says Dr. Zahra Kurji, a pediatric dentist. "One of my colleagues suggests that at Hallowe'en you let your child eat as much candy as he or she can for three days, and then throw the rest away. That way the exposure is short term. You will also find that a child gets sick of sweet stuff pretty quickly."

If a child eats sweets, Kurji recommends that they be served after a meal when saliva production is already stimulated and helps to wash away the acids. "The worst time is just before bed when the acid has all night to do harm. The worst sweets are sticky ones that adhere to the teeth. And the biggest culprit is frequency – a constant infusion of sugars allows acids to attack the teeth for a long time."

Though cavities may seem insignificant, they are a bacterial infection that left uncurbed, can cause pain and can even make a child seriously ill. Filling a cavity can be upsetting for small children and their parents. Babies and children under three may need a general anesthetic to treat extensive decay. "There are people who think the primary (baby) teeth are not important," says Dr. Kurji, "But letting teeth deteriorate can result in pain or abscess, and may affect the dentition of permanent teeth. Who would want that for their child?"

Pediatric dentists across Canada are greatly concerned about the significant rise in childhood caries; they met in Calgary a year ago to look at both the causes and solutions. A major cause for the increase in childhood caries is the increased consumption of sugary drinks, candy and processed food that contain refined carbohydrates. Other major causes are poor oral hygiene and the trend to drink bottled water which contains no or minimal fluoride.

The solutions begin with educating parents. Oral care should begin in infancy with parents wiping an infant's mouth with a clean cloth after every feeding. This gets children used to having hands in their mouth and enables the parents to spot any problems. When the teeth begin to erupt, they should be brushed with just a smear of toothpaste. Dr. Kurji suggests oral care for babies and small children take place with the child laid on a living room couch or bed, rather than in a bathroom -- a position that makes the child more comfortable and allows the parent to see everything in the mouth more easily.

Infancy is also the ideal time for the first dental visit – it is recommended that a baby is seen by a dentist between six months to a year. This early visit confirms there are no problems with the teeth or mouth, gets the child used to visiting the dentist, and enables the dentist to provide patient education to the parents. “Good nutrition and oral health habits are instilled between the ages of one and six,” says Dr. Botchway. “So starting your baby off early goes a long way in preventing cavities in children and teens.”

Children can start to brush their own teeth at about age 5-8 or whenever they have the manual dexterity and patience. “If children can tie their own shoelaces or independently use a knife and fork at meals, they likely old enough to take care of their teeth,” says Dr. Kurji. “But they should be supervised until you are sure they are doing it effectively.”

Though dentists were at one time recommending using non-fluoridated toothpaste for children under three, the Canadian Dental Association now recommends that it be used in small quantities to provide protection. Fluoridated water is also recommended. Teeth should be brushed after every meal and before bedtime.

If school age children don't come home for lunch, pack a health snack for school and have them brush after school when they return home, especially if they have a snack. Good snacks include cheese, which actually buffers and improves the acid balance, crackers, vegetables and fruit. Crunchy vegetables like carrots and fibrous vegetables like celery actually help to clean and strengthen the teeth. If you want to provide a sweet treat, give children chewing gum, cookies or lozenges made with xylitol, a plant sugar that has been shown to inhibit bacteria and reduce acidity in the mouth.

At Hallowe'en and other holidays, it's part of our culture to have kids eat sweet treats; just make sure their teeth are thoroughly cleaned afterward. Otherwise, the sugar treat will play a nasty trick on your child's pearly whites and your peace of mind.

For more information about kids and cavities, talk to your dentist or go to the Alberta Dental Association and College website www.abda.ab.ca.

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