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Teen Years Time for Great Smile and Good Oral Health

A great smile can't ensure an active social life for a teenager, but it sure can help. That's why attention to oral health is so important in the teen years. Yet how to fit in proper dental care around school, work, sports and dating?

“People judge others through physical appearance, which very much involves the smile,” said Dr. Sarah Hulland, a Calgary pediatric dentist who is president of the Alberta Academy of Pediatric Dentists. “And this judgment is even stronger in the teen years. Who wants to kiss the guy with the stinky breath or talk to the girl with discoloured teeth? Poor oral hygiene can negatively affect both job opportunities and relationships. Healthy teeth and a great smile are attractive to others and help give self-confidence.”

However, teens face special challenges in keeping their teeth and gums healthy. Diet is one factor. Teenagers consume more pop and other sugary liquids than other age groups, which increases their risk of cavities and teeth erosion. “Colas, electrolyte beverages and highly caffeinated drinks are high in acids and can gradually wear down enamel, especially on the upper front teeth,” said Dr. Hulland.

Besides the type of food, frequency of eating is a factor. Teens typically have several snacks a day besides the three basic meals, and these can be substantial. “Most fast food contains high amounts of sugars and fermentable carbohydrates which turn into sugar,” said Dr. Hulland. “A typical hamburger, fries and pop combo contains up to 2500 calories as well as sugars. Not only is their increased risk of cavities from the sugars, some dentists think there may be a relationship between fats and cavities.”

Besides the inconvenience and cost of having a tooth filled, consider this sobering fact: the average filling to an adult tooth may last about ten years, so the time and cost could be repeated many times if the cavity is acquired at a young age. Prevention comes by adjusting the diet and by brushing and flossing after eating or drinking anything except water – both difficult things for teens on the go. An alternate is to rinse the mouth with water or fluoride rinse. “Good oral care is particularly important for teens with ‘hardware’ like braces or retainers.”

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Lifestyle can also affect teenagers' oral health. Some teens take up smoking tobacco or marijuana, both potentially damaging to gums. And partying, where alcohol (which also contains high doses of sugar) and recreational drugs are consumed, can fuel fights and accidents that result in tooth damage.

Teens with eating disorders like anorexia or bulimia are at high risk for tooth decay. Binging and vomiting cause a double wash of sugars and acids over the teeth; violent vomiting can even result in chipped teeth. Brushing immediately after a bout is not recommended as the fluoride in toothpaste adds to the acid mix. Rinsing with water or a baking soda and water mix is the best solution.

Even teens who stick to healthier lifestyles like sports are at risk of tooth damage. Hullah and other dentists recommend the use of mouth guards for any sport, not just team sports. "I've seen plenty of damage from mountain biking and downhill skiing," says Hullah. She also advises that mouth guards be replaced annually since their elasticity breaks down on exposure to saliva and the elements. And, surprisingly, the mouth guard needs to be brushed after use, just like the teeth.

Since appearance is key in the teen years, some teenagers go to extremes to get pure white teeth. Hullah and other dentists advise against teeth whitening before age 16 as the adult teeth are still erupting and settling at younger ages. It's also unknown whether the bleaching agents cause long term damage, but short term use is known to cause sensitivity to gums and teeth, and may cause gum infection.

"If you're unsure about what's safe and what's not, it's best to ask your dentist," says Hullah. "Both teens and their parents need to know how to maintain oral health and an attractive smile – it can pay big dividends."

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

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