



**Dental decay is the direct result of the interaction between teeth, plaque bacteria and sugars from the diet.**

Dr Colin Priestland regularly refers patients to Mrs Vivienne Salu, a nutritionist in Townsville, for advice on how to reduce the frequency with which refined carbohydrate is ingested and how to substitute foods to make better food choices with the least disruption to home life and the home budget!

The problem with sugar or “carb” intake, is that much of the sugar we consume is hidden in our diet by food manufacturers, particularly if you choose pre-packaged food, as it is used to extend the shelf life of food products.

Of course many people have a sweet tooth and add sugar to tea and coffee and they love their fizzy drinks. It is very clear that they are ingesting too much sugar, too often. It is however, the hidden sugars that appear to pose the greatest problems because very many patients are unaware that they have a problem.

Sadly I frequently see children who have suffered from extensive tooth decay and who are too young to accept the necessary dental treatment they need in the dental chair at the family dentist. These young children in some cases may be suffering from infection including tooth abscesses or pain arising from decay. The only option for these children is to treat them under general anaesthetic while they are asleep. Such treatment is upsetting for parents, the child and can be very costly.

Adults too suffer from both extensive decay and from gum disease. If these conditions are left untreated, severe infections may follow and in the case of gum disease, the bone surrounding the affected teeth can be destroyed leading to mobile or loose teeth, infection and later abscess formation and finally tooth loss.

Often the dental problems are left untreated because the patient is highly anxious of dental treatment and has simply avoided dental examinations or treatment for many years. In such cases treatment of advanced dental disease may involve the extraction of several teeth and/or numerous fillings. But before we attempt to save or remove the teeth, it is necessary to try to eliminate the causative factors that are leading to the dental disease in the first place.

Diet plays a key role in causing dental decay. The intake of sugar-containing foods allows the bacteria to feed on the sugars and produce acid that then attacks the tooth surfaces and causes cavities to form. Sugars also feed the bacteria that are closely associated with gum disease and hence the gum disease becomes more severe.

Diet is extremely important and the frequency with which sugars are ingested is the major contributing factor to the severity and progression of dental decay. Sugar must be limited only to main mealtimes and not ingested at any time between these meals in patients who have dental disease.

Often over the years patients tell us that the reason they have widespread tooth decay is because they have poor quality enamel. While poor enamel can exist in certain genetic conditions such as “*amelogenesis imperfecta*”, these conditions are extremely rare. Put very simply, tooth decay is present due to:

- Too much plaque
- Too much sugar (*can be hidden in the diet unknown to the patient*)
- Too frequent sugar intake.

Vivienne Salu has the knowledge and experience to help our patients reduce the impact of sugars on their dental health and at the same time will assist in improving your diet and promoting general health and well being through better food choices.

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