

A FEW COMMON QUESTIONS

Dear Dr. McCrummen:

Do soda's hurt teeth, and what other types of drinks are a problem? Yes, they can damage teeth very badly. Most soda's contain phosphoric acid as a flavor enhancer (diet soda usually has more) which can instantly dissolve enamel on contact. Fruit juice's often have acids, and added sugar, making them no better for your teeth than soda's, though maybe more healthy, otherwise. Anything with acid can hurt teeth, including tomato juice, lemonade, orange juice, and the like. Check the labels for acid and sugar content and keep in mind that 4 grams of sugar equals about 1 teaspoonful. The sugar in drinks helps cause cavities when it interacts with plaque on the teeth. If it has any, follow with a swish of water to immediately dilute the acids and sugar. Damage is done almost immediately with acids, and within 15 minutes after sugar is consumed, so brushing later is not very effective when consuming these products. Some candy, like SweetTarts, have malic acid for tartness so check candy labels, also. These added acids not only hurt teeth, they have been found to hurt bones and contribute to osteoporosis. Acids take the shine out of the teeth and increase staining. Some people swish a little of their drink, or let a drink roll around in their mouth before swallowing for more taste, but this adds a lot to the damage. It would be better to use a straw if you consume acidic and sugary drinks.

Does indigestion or throwing up-from being sick hurt the teeth? Sickness, with short term vomiting, is not a real concern, but frequent exposure from stomach acids due to chronic indigestion, and especially from the eating disorder "bulimia", can destroy teeth very fast. Stomach acids contain a very strong acid that dissolves the upper teeth, especially the back side of the front teeth. Irreversible damage is done that leads to thinning and shortening of teeth, chipping of the edges, sensitivity, root canals, crowning of teeth, and eventual loss of teeth leading to dentures. Rinsing with water immediately after acid exposure will help. Though most people that are bulimic brush their teeth right after vomiting, this is actually harmful. The acids weaken the enamel and it is easily brushed away. Daily use of a prescription fluoride toothpaste helps, but stopping the acid exposure is most important. Bulimia is a horrible eating disorder that severely damages the body in many ways. If you have an eating disorder please seek counseling and speak with your doctor, if you know someone that has it, suggest counseling soon. It is a very difficult habit to break and can be a lifelong struggle that affects females about 80% of the time, and males about 20% of the time. It is a disorder that causes much dental frustration, eventual discomfort, ongoing and increasing dental expenses, and often disfigures people as it progresses.

How do I keep my dental expenses down? Only two very easy things to do are necessary: 1) Take the four to six minutes, each and every day, to do what you know that you are supposed to do at home, and, 2) See your dentist regularly to let them help you prevent or control problems, educate you with the latest information, and catch problems early when they are easier and less expensive to treat. Follow your doctor's advice and may realize that dentists actually try to talk themselves out of work and encourage you to reduce your expenses. Your dentist wants you to have good health and will have very little to do if you start your kids out right, and make sure they follow through. Many adults suffer from their early years of neglect, large old metal fillings, decay around them, and eventual breakage of weak teeth. There is not much you can do in those cases of previously damaged teeth except to have them checked and repaired as soon as possible, but you can reduce new problems with the above two recommendations. Dentistry is really not what is expensive; neglect is really what costs so much. Avoiding dental visits is usually a lot more costly than routine preventive visits. Also, do what the doctor recommends despite insurance coverage. The insurance company does not care about your health and comfort; they just want to reduce their losses by not paying for what you may need. Your dentist cares about you and your health, and a long-term, comfortable solution to your problems.

Is gum OK to chew? Generally, no. Your teeth and jaw joints were not meant to be used continuously, and it can be damaging to weak or loose teeth. The normal rest position for your jaw should be with your teeth slightly apart; about 1/16th to 1/8th of an inch in the front. If they are noticeably together, relax and let them separate. Seeing people's lower jaw muscles flex is a sign of clenching, which is usually quite harmful. Chewing is often done more on a favorite side, like being right or left-handed. This can cause soreness or popping of typically the opposite side joint in front of the ear, and can lead to headaches. If you chew gum be sure it is sugarless, and the preferable substitute is Xylitol. Xylitol has been shown to be helpful in stopping cavities, and even reversing the early process in some studies. Also, the extra saliva that is produced while chewing can dilute acids if done right after eating.

