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Hidden Cavity Culprits

Dentist Warns Parents About Seemingly Innocent Foods

Six Hidden Cavity Culprits

Seemingly innocent foods, medicines can harbor cavity-causing bacteria.

by Rebecca Kelly
Community contributor

The number of preschoolers and young kids with cavities has continued to rise over the years, which begs the question, “Why?” While many parents may be aware of issues with the more commonly-known culprits such as soda, candy or high-sugary juices, there are plenty of other foods that can lead to tooth decay that are not so obvious.

According to pediatric dentist Sheryl Radin, DDS, therein lies the danger. Dr. Radin, owner of Growing Smiles in Floral Vale in Yardley, said many of the families she treats are shocked to hear that some of the foods and medicines they give their kids — sometimes on a daily basis — contain hidden cavity-culprits. Since February is National Children’s Dental Health Month, Radin shared her top six culprits that may be causing cavities in your kids’ teeth.

Cavity-culprit No. 1: Gummy vitamins.

If you’re one of the parents who assume there can’t be a problem with a product containing “vitamins,” you’re not alone, Radin said.

“Most of the parents I warn about gummy vitamins are understandably upset because they believed they were giving their children something that was good for them, but were unknowingly giving candy in disguise,” Radin explained. “Due to its stickiness, the risk for cavities far outweighs any benefits. Anything ‘gummy-related’ such as gummy bears, fish, etc., can adhere to teeth and is a perfect breeding ground for cavities.”

The fix: It’s important *not* to brush your child’s teeth for at least 20 minutes after chewing a gummy vitamin as the bristles can actually help spread the sticky residue to neighboring teeth. Best bet is to have your child chew the gummy during a meal and rinse with water after; or better yet, make the switch to sugar-free chewable vitamins altogether.

Cavity-culprit No. 2: Liquid medicines.

As the song from “Mary Poppins” goes, “A spoonful of sugar helps the medicine go down,” which is exactly what drug



Dr. Sheryl Radin is a pediatric dentist at Growing Smiles in Floral Vale, located at 808 Floral Vale Boulevard, Yardley. Photo courtesy of Growing Smiles

companies have added to some of today’s children’s medicines and cough syrups.

“A single dose of medicine can contain as much as 50 percent sugar, not to mention can contain high fructose corn syrup, which can significantly contribute to tooth decay,” Radin said. “The biggest concern is that parents often give these medicines at bedtime — *after* teeth have been brushed. Tooth decay can occur as sugar will just sit on a child’s teeth for the 8-12 hours he or she is sleeping, allowing bacteria in the mouth to do its worst.”

The fix: The good news is that there are things parents can do to help lessen the effects.

“Try giving your child medicine during a meal, and not after,” Radin suggested. “That way, saliva can help break down the sugar and acid. In addition, it’s important to brush thoroughly after giving medicine. Lastly, use a pill form whenever possible.”

Cavity-culprit No. 3: Cereal.

Touted as the most important meal of the day, breakfast is certainly a vital component in a child’s overall nutrition; but cereals can be some of the worst offenders in the fight against cavities. According to a recent study at the University of Illinois, sugary cereals even eaten dry could cause tooth decay, and when followed by fruit juice, it is an even higher cavity-causing combination.

“What is so interesting about this study is that it showed that some sugary cereals when combined with milk will take on a ‘syrup-like’ texture, similar to rinsing with a 10 percent sugar solution,” Radin said. “Even the so-called ‘healthy cereals’ can contain boatloads of sugar, and will have sneaky cavity-culprits, such as sugar-coated raisins.”

The fix: Try adding natural fruits to a cereal base, such as bran or shredded wheat.

“Adding unsweetened raisins to bran flakes will not increase plaque-causing acid, plus you will be omitting any additional unnecessary sugar,” Radin said. “You can also add fresh (or frozen) fruit such as raspberries or blueberries to cereal, or try sliced peaches or apricots mixed with natural yogurt, making it a tasty meal for kids without all of the damaging effects to tooth enamel.”

Cavity-culprit No. 4: Carbohydrates.

Foods laden with starch such as white bread, pizza, bagels, potato chips, crackers, etc., can convert to sugar almost immediately. In fact, consuming sugars or starches will cause cavity-producing acids to cover the teeth for 20 minutes or more after eating.

“Foods loaded with starch and high in carbs can wreak havoc on your child’s teeth,” Radin warned. “Cookies, candy, pretzels, crackers, and potato chips are carbohydrates that break down into sugar while they’re still in the mouth. Bacteria in the mouth convert these sugars into acids, which dissolves tooth structure and can eventually cause tooth decay.”

The fix: The best offense is a good defense, meaning when eating fermentable carbs, combine them with other foods to help neutralize acids.

“If your son wants crackers, for instance, it is better to give him cheese with it because cheese naturally aids in neutralizing acids. You can also give him raw vegetables or crunchy fruits like apples with high water content to dilute the sugar — a healthy alternative if you don’t have access to a toothbrush.”

Cavity-culprit No. 5: Prepackaged fruit.

Before you reach for that can of mixed fruit or those small containers filled with slices of oranges, you need to double-check that you’re getting the real deal, and not just a container of artificial sugar.

“Giving your child fruit as a snack or for dessert is a good way to satisfy his or her sweet tooth while getting beneficial nutrients and fiber,” Radin explained. “The problem is that many companies will pack fruit in heavy syrup, which not only takes away these benefits, but adds unnecessary sugar in the process.”

The fix: “Look for fruit that is packed in its own juices or water. Check the ingredients list on the label before buying and steer clear of ones that list sugar, high-fructose corn syrup, corn syrup solids, sorghum or inverted sugar among the first ingredients.”

Cavity-culprit No. 6: Sour food.

Does your child like sweet or sour foods? Whichever your child prefers, does it make a difference? The answer is yes, according to Radin. Teeth exposed to sour foods can have significantly softer enamel than the teeth exposed to its sweeter versions.

“In order to give foods and candy that sharp sour flavor, many manufacturers will add a variety of acids which can be much harder on teeth than their sugary counterparts, creating deep craters in tooth enamel,” Radin said. “The likelihood of cavities becoming a problem in your child’s mouth depends on the pH balance — the more acidic it is, the worse it will be for the health of his or her teeth.”

The fix: “You may think it’s better to divvy out a few pieces of candy to your kids over the course of hours or stretched over a few days, but it’s quite the opposite,” Radin explained. “A few pieces given at once will do less damage to teeth and leads

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Top row photos, from left: The sour truth: "Most parents don't realize sour foods and candy can be worse for kids' teeth than their sweeter counterparts," according to pediatric dentist Dr. Sheryl Radin. Radin suggests having children wait at least 20 minutes after eating a gummy vitamin before brushing their teeth. Middle row photos, from left: The lobby of Growing Smiles in Floral Vale. Dr. Sheryl Radin has an appointment with a child. Bottom row photos, from left: Dr. Radin says that many of the families she treats are shocked to hear that some of the foods and medicines they give their kids — sometimes on a daily basis — contain hidden cavity-culprits. The staff at Growing Smiles in Floral Vale take a break to pose for a group photo. A view of the examination room. Top right photo courtesy of hib; All other photos courtesy of Growing Smiles

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to fewer potential cavities than if the acidity levels are elevated for longer periods of time. So, if your daughter is excited to have some candy hearts found at Valentine's Day, let her have a few at one sitting, and that's it. If the candy is sour, however, hold off on the brushing. The action of brushing can actually spread the acid onto more tooth surfaces, increasing its erosive action on tooth enamel."

"A single dose of medicine can contain as much as 50 percent sugar, not to mention can contain high fructose corn syrup, which can significantly contribute to tooth decay,"
—Dr. Sheryl Radin

Sheryl Radin, DDS, owner of Growing Smiles in Floral Vale, located at 808 Floral Vale Boulevard in Yardley, has been practicing dentistry for more than 25 years and has a strong commitment to excellence in her field. Radin received her undergraduate degree from Temple University School of Electrical Engineering Technology and soon after, she graduated from Temple University School of Dentistry in 1982. Radin completed her residency in Pediatric Dentistry from Episcopal Hospital in Philadelphia, where she was Chief Resident. She went on to receive her Certificate in Pediatric Dentistry in 1997 and completed an additional two years of specialty training beyond dental school in order to specialize in treating infants, children and teens. She currently holds a faculty position at Temple University Kornberg School of Dentistry and is the school dentist for the Pennsbury School District in Bucks County, Pennsylvania. Radin is a member of the American Dental Association, Pennsylvania Dental Association and the American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry.

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