

Which Sugars Rot Your Teeth, and Which Don't?

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Do all sugars give you cavities?

If you have a sweet tooth, you'll be very happy to know the answer to this question is "no." In fact, there are almost 13 different kinds of sugar that may actually be healthy, and two in particular may even prove to be good for your teeth.

Now for the bad news: the sugars you probably enjoy the most aren't on that list.

Researchers at the Washington Post analyzed 28 naturally-occurring sugars and 7 artificial sweeteners. They looked at the consequences of eating each of these sugars on tooth decay, as well as metabolism, suitability for cooking, impact on diabetes, nutritional content and whether or not the sugar in question has an unpleasant aftertaste. Here's what they found.

Which Sugars Rot Your Teeth?

You're probably not surprised to learn that table sugar (sucrose), brown sugar, corn syrup (glucose) and high fructose corn syrup all can cause decay. What you might not expect is that "natural" sweeteners like honey, maple syrup, agave nectar (fructose), brown rice syrup (maltose), milk sugar (lactose), cane sugar molasses and sorghum syrup can also harm your teeth.

Two other "bad" sugars were trehalose, a natural preservative used in some foods, and galactose, which may be harmful to people who can't digest it.

Why do these sugars rot teeth? It turns out that not only do these sugars tickle our taste buds; they also fuel the bacteria that naturally live in tooth plaque. These bacteria feed on carbohydrates, which sugars are, and produce acid as a byproduct through a process of simple fermentation, reports Live Science. The acid slowly eats away at the tooth enamel, causing rot.

The good news is that regularly brushing one's teeth, whether after eating a meal or a candy bar, can starve the bacteria and keep decay under control.

Even if you can't brush, the Health Site suggests drinking water or rinsing your mouth out with water after eating to neutralize the effects of acidic and sugary foods.

Which Sugars Are OK?

A couple of sugars on the *Washington Post's* list appear to protect teeth. Those include xylitol (Xylosweet) and erythritol (Zsweet). Xylitol is synthesized from corncobs and birch trees and can help re-mineralize tooth enamel. Xylitol is often found in chewing gum and candy, but please be aware that it is poisonous to dogs. Erythritol is 60-80 percent as sweet as table sugar. It's used primarily in chewing gum, baked goods and beverages, and occurs naturally in pears, soy sauce, wine, sake, watermelon and grapes. Erythritol cannot be metabolized by the bacteria in the mouth, which is why it does not cause cavities.

In addition, Stevia leaf powder, lucuma powder, monk fruit, lactitol, sorbitol and mannitol are among the sugars that are not linked to cavities. However, some of these sweeteners do have other undesirable side effects. For example, mannitol is used in the hard coating applied to some pills, but very large doses can damage the kidneys and heart. Glycerol, or glycerin, keeps food moist. But high doses can cause nausea and dizziness. And rebaudioside, which you might know as Truvia or SweetLeaf, just hasn't been tested enough to understand what, if any, serious side effects it might have.

What About Artificial Sweeteners?

None of the artificial sweeteners on the Post's lists were linked to tooth decay. They include saccharin (Sweet'nLow), Sucralose (Splenda), Aspartame (Equal), Advantame, Neotame and Acesulfame potassium. However, a study found that Saccharin, Sucralose and Aspartame could cause stomach upsets. And in fact, "Aspartame tops our list of sugar substitutes to avoid, because it caused cancer in three independent studies using laboratory rats and mice," reports the Center for Science in the Public Interest. CSPI questions the health safety of the other artificial sweeteners as well.

Bottom Line?

Here's the advice my kids' dentist always gives them:

- * Eat a little sugar, not a lot.
- * Limit sugary foods and carbohydrates that are more likely to get stuck on your teeth. Toffee sticks; apples don't.
- * Brush and floss morning and night to remove food that could be hiding between teeth and feeding the bacteria that cause decay.
- * If you can't brush, at least rinse to remove excess food particles and sugars.
- * Treat sugary sodas, fruit juices and energy drinks the same way you would candy and other food: brush and rinse after you drink them so their sweet residue doesn't stick around in your mouth.