

Halloween doesn't have to be a horror for children's teeth

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Sweet treats are as much a part of Halloween as haunted houses, creative costumes and the Monster Mash. They're fun to collect, but having that big bag of candy around the house for weeks after Halloween can't be good for children's oral health.

We spoke with Kavita Mathu-Muju, an associate professor and pediatric

dentist in UBC's faculty of dentistry, about the toll treats take on teeth, and how you can help your kids get their chompers through the season relatively unscathed.

In the grand scheme of things, how harmful is Halloween to [children's](#) teeth?

Like most things in life, the key to enjoying Halloween is moderation. So, if parents accept that their children are going to spend a week overindulging on candy, then there are a few simple things to keep in mind that can really minimize the cavity-causing potential of Halloween treats.

What are those?

Bacteria in our mouth break down the sugar in Halloween candy to produce acid. The longer the teeth are exposed to acid, the greater the chance that tooth enamel will break down, and this is what causes cavities. So there are three key things to remember:

First, the consistency. The stickier the candy, the worse it is for teeth.

Secondly, the duration of exposure to sugary candy. The longer a child holds candy or sweets in the mouth, the longer the exposure to sugar, and the worse it's going to be for the teeth. For example, think about sucking on a lollipop for half an hour. That is a really long time to expose mouth bacteria to sugar. Just compare that to eating a small bit of chocolate, which disappears down into the stomach right away.

Finally, keep in mind how frequently your child is eating candy. Eating just one lollipop is probably not going to cause any irreparable harm. But having several lollipops a day will definitely increase the likelihood of developing cavities.

From an [oral health](#) perspective, is it better to finish off candy quickly, or try to stretch it out until Christmas?

It's definitely better to finish off the candy quickly. For example, if someone has a package of lifesavers, is it better to eat one lifesaver on the hour, every hour, until the package is finished, or is it better to eat the whole package all at once? It's actually better to finish up the whole package at once, because this minimizes the mouth bacteria's exposure to sugar.

Do you have any special oral hygiene tips to share for the season?

After Halloween night is over, leftover candy should be consumed only as a treat right after dinner, and that's because the saliva produced during a meal can help wash away that sugary residue. Plus, bedtime comes after dinner, so a child will be brushing his or her [teeth](#) and that will help minimize the potential of developing cavities. I also recommend avoiding snacking on leftover candy during the day. Definitely don't put it in your child's lunchbox as a snack for recess.

What's it like to be a dentist treating children in the first week of November?

Actually it's fun, because children come in and they really enjoy sharing their Halloween experiences and telling us about their costumes. What we usually hear is stories about parents eating their [candy](#), so I'm not always sure it's the children we should be worrying about after Halloween.

Provided by University of British Columbia

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