

Tips for maintaining good oral health when it's easy to be tempted by sweet treats and drinks

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Credit: Tim Douglas from Pexels

Whether it's a cup of punch at a New Year's party or a slice of cake at another holiday gathering, sweet treats can be tempting—but they can

also have a significant impact on your oral health, according to Tufts experts.

Aikaterini Papathanasiou, D116, professor and interim chair of the Department of Comprehensive Care at Tufts University School of Dental Medicine (TUSDM), stresses to her patients and students that although "maintaining good oral health throughout the year is very important," it's especially vital during the holidays, when "we should be more mindful of our snacking, eating, and drinking."

Carbohydrate-based snacks and drinks can cause problems for our mouths, ranging from tooth decay and cavities to fractured or chipped teeth. Papathanasiou and Cheen Loo, chair of pediatric dentistry at TUSDM shared tips for keeping teeth intact and healthy this time of year.

Maintain balance in your diet

Loo suggests ensuring there's a balance of foods available for guests if you're hosting or attending a party. Simple updates to typical menus, like making [fresh produce](#) more appealing for children by getting creative, can help stave off dental injury and tooth decay.

"If you're going to put out food during a party, include choices like fruit, vegetables, dairy—such as cheese—in a way to make them fun for kids," Loo said. Social media apps can be a great resource for ideas, like charcuterie trees with meats, cheese, and [fresh vegetables](#), or themed fruit kabobs, which are kid-friendly finger foods.

Be mindful of the snacks you choose

Things that can stick to your teeth, such as taffy, toffees and gummy

candies, can cause major damage, so Papathanasiou says to avoid them at all costs.

"Based on my experience, dental emergencies increase during the holidays," Papathanasiou said. "These emergencies are typically related to fractured or chipped teeth due to biting on hard candies or popcorn kernels; loose crowns due to eating sticky sweets; tooth loss, displacement, or fracture due to injury; pain from TMJ disorder; and jaw discomfort due to grinding from holiday-related stress."

There's a lot to think about when making a selection during the holidays, and Loo notes that many people may not even realize that eating small chocolate candies like M&Ms will be better for their dental health than something like a cookie.

"If you're putting out a candy bowl, fill it with chocolate rather than sticky candies like gummies," Loo said. "Chocolate will melt and not stay on your teeth as long as sticky candies. Things like fruit snacks are particularly bad and offer no fruit, no nutritional value, and are very sticky, too."

Remember alcohol counts, too

When it comes to beverages, ones containing alcohol increase the risk for [oral health](#) problems and erosion.

"Alcoholic drinks often contain sugar and are acidic, contributing to [tooth decay](#)," Papathanasiou said. "Additionally, drinks that are dark in color, like red wine, can result in teeth discoloration. And when [alcoholic drinks](#) are consumed frequently, excessively, and for an extended period of time, alcohol consumption can become a risk factor for developing gum disease, dry mouth, health problems, and oral cancer."

To make it simple, Papathanasiou recommends limiting alcohol consumption, no matter the type.

"Since drinks with [high sugar content](#), such as many mixed cocktails, can result in decay and acidic drinks can result in tooth erosion, it is important to limit [alcohol consumption](#)," she suggests "Instead, stay hydrated with water to maintain your oralhealth."

Brush your teeth—at the right time

After eating acidic foods and consuming acidic drinks, like [alcoholic beverages](#) and [fruit juices](#), Papathanasiou recommends waiting 30 minutes to brush your [teeth](#), but recommended alternatives to ensure limited damage to the enamel, or outer layer of the tooth.

"After eating or snacking, it is helpful to rinse your mouth with water to remove any remaining food particles," she noted. "Chewing unsweetened gum stimulates salivary flow helping in cavity prevention. Sugarless mints or gums with xylitol are recommended."

Provided by Tufts University

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