Should kids eat all Halloween candy at once, or spread it out? Dentists and nutritionists weigh in

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The scariness of Halloween is supposed to come from ghosts and goblins, but some parents are more alarmed by what's left over: an avalanche of candy.

They can probably relax a bit, say experts in pediatric nutrition and dentistry.

Yes, sugar can contribute to a variety of health consequences, from tooth decay to diabetes. But for most children, a short-term surge in candy consumption is no reason to worry, says Sarah Barnes, a pediatric dietitian at La Salle University's School of Nursing and Health Sciences.

And while dentists generally discourage sugary treats, they tend to be realistic about Halloween. Parents can minimize dental damage by guiding children toward certain types of treats and reminding them to brush afterward, says Brenda L. Branson, a dentist who practices in Glenside.

For more on how parents can encourage children to eat sweets responsibly without taking the fun out of the holiday, Barnes and Branson offer these tips.

Are some candies worse for your teeth than others?

Sugar is fuel for various bacteria in your mouth that lead to cavities and gum disease, and candy contains a lot of sugar.

But some sugary treats are worse for your teeth than others.

The difference, Branson said, lies in how long the sugar spends on the tooth surface. The less time, the better. By that measure, chocolate is the "least bad."

"It melts quickly and it disperses quickly," she said, "unlike the sweet lollipop that lingers on your teeth for a long time, or the Tootsie Roll that just sits there in the grooves."

And dark chocolate is less harmful to the teeth than milk chocolate, as it generally contains less sugar, according to the American Dental Association.

What about candy alternatives?

Some well-meaning parents may steer their children toward non-candy treats on Halloween, such as potato chips or pretzels.

But from a dental standpoint, they aren't much different from candy, said Branson, who treats children and adults in her Montgomery County practice.

That's because these starchy snacks contain complex carbohydrates, which are broken down
inside the mouth into simple carbohydrates: sugars. Branson, the dentist, agreed.

"People don't think of those food items being particularly deleterious, but they are," she said. "They cake into the biting surface of your teeth, and they sit there. Or they sit along the gum line, and they stay there for a long period of time."

Remove residue from sugary treats, drinks, or chips by rinsing and brushing carefully—twice a day, the Dental Association recommends.

**Should kids spread out their candy over several weeks?**

Candy has little or no nutritional value, so every mouthful of sweets is taking up space that would be better filled with healthful foods.

U.S. dietary guidelines recommend that children under 2 consume no foods with added sugar. Older children should get less than 10% of their calories from added sugar.

By that logic, it would make sense to spread out a bagful of candy over several weeks. But on Halloween, it's OK for older children to eat a lot all at once—if they want, said Barnes, an assistant professor of nutrition at La Salle.

"I'm not going to be concerned about the consequences of a one-night candy fiasco," she said. "If they do overdo it, and they do get a tummy ache, they will learn that lesson a lot faster than if they have a parent hovering over them, saying they will get a tummy ache."

Still, parents should decide on a candy plan with their trick-or-treaters before the big night, she said. The approach that works for one family may not work for another, but generally, it makes sense to involve children in a reasonable discussion about how much to eat.

If, on the other hand, parents go overboard in restricting candy—perhaps hiding it or constantly harping on its dangers—children may view it as a forbidden fruit, and become more likely to seek it out, she said.

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