

Dental decay, what is it? And why is it hurting our nation's children?



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There's a crisis facing our nation's children, and it may not be what first comes to mind.

According to the most recent survey by the NHS (Hospital Admitted Patient Care Activity, 2023-24), dental decay and toothache continue to be the leading cause for hospital admissions of children aged 5-9 in England, at 19,381 admissions per year. To better understand the magnitude of this issue, I hope to help teach readers of the causes and consequences of dental disease, to help parents and families reduce the burden of poor oral health on our nation's children.

Two diseases remain the pillars of dentistry, tooth decay and gum disease (SDCEP). The most important thing to understand regarding these diseases, is that both are almost entirely preventable! When managed appropriately at home with regular brushing and cleaning between the teeth, and regular visits to the dentist to monitor progression of disease, many patients can live happy, pain free lives. Both of these diseases are caused by the accumulation of food, proteins and bacterial biofilm that we call dental plaque. By removing the plaque from the mouth through mechanical forces, brushing flossing etc we can prevent the build-up and damage from occurring in the first place. Dental decay is a progressive disease that starts small but can grow large, resulting in painful cavities that could need root canal treatments or extractions! Dental decay happens when the dental plaque digests all the foods and sugars that we love to eat, into various acids that breakdown the strong and hardy enamel of our teeth, softening it until it eventually gives way to the soft, inner part of the tooth, causing painful symptoms. Once decay has set in, often the only treatment is to perform a filling or extract the tooth.



UK governmental guidelines (DBOH) recommend children aged one to three have their teeth brushed by their parents twice a day with toothpaste containing 1000ppm fluoride, and children aged three to seven should have their teeth brushed by parents twice a day with toothpaste containing 1450ppm fluoride. The use of fluoride toothpastes is critical. Years of scientific evidence has shown that fluoride can strengthen the tooth's resistance to erosion and decay from acid and bacteria through microscopic changes to the tooth's surface, helping to remineralise the enamel and stop the progression of dental decay.

As children get older, they continue to gain independence and are allowed to brush their own teeth. But as we all know, children are not always honest with us, so it is important that parents observe their children brushing until age nine. With access to education and information on the burden of tooth decay, I hope that this article can reach those who share our concerns. Together we can combat the scourge of toothache and reduce the number of young children requiring admission to hospital for treatment of painful dental disease.



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