

What wears down your teeth

A recent study found that an increasing number of young adults are suffering from oral problems and this could be due to their acidic diet.

Joyce Teo reports

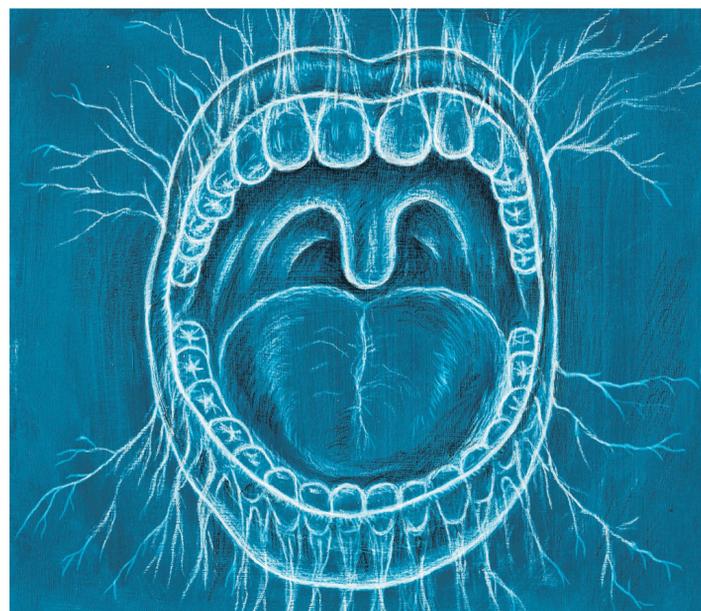


ILLUSTRATION: THE NEW YORK TIMES

Though there is nothing as bad for your teeth as sugar, diets that are high in acidic foods can be damaging as well, as the acid wears down tooth enamel, leading to dentine hypersensitivity.

A recent Pan-European study, sponsored by GlaxoSmithKline, found that more young adults are suffering from tooth wear and dentine hypersensitivity. Those who frequently consume acidic food products, such as soda, had higher levels of tooth wear.

Acid softens the tooth's protective enamel surface and leaves it vulnerable to further wear from abrasion and attrition, it said.

As the enamel is worn down, the soft, porous layer beneath – the dentine – is exposed, making teeth sensitive to hot or cold foods and drinks.

"I would say that 60 per cent of the people who come to me with gum problems have sensitivity issues," said Dr Edwin Heng, a periodontist at Specialist Dental Group (Gleneagles), who specialises in the prevention, diagnosis and treatment of gum disease.

"One key reason is their diet. Young people these days have a more acidic diet."

Some of the key culprits, which Dr Heng pointed

out, include carbonated drinks, alcoholic drinks such as wine, trendy drinks such as citrus bubble tea, and popular dishes such as mee siam or tom yum soup.

Dr See Toh Young Liang, a consultant at the prosthodontics unit at the department of restorative dentistry at National Dental Centre Singapore, said: "Acidic drinks and food reduce the pH level in the mouth. When the pH level drops, our oral environment becomes acidic and our teeth are more vulnerable to attacks or demineralisation."

To protect your teeth, avoid or limit the intake of acidic food. When you do consume them, rinse out your mouth afterwards with water.

"Rinsing with water will neutralise or wash away the acids in the oral cavity," added Dr See Toh.

It is also best to consume a varied and balanced diet of different food types to reduce the risk of dentine hypersensitivity, he said.

If you have the habit of brushing right after dinner, stop doing so. Acids weaken tooth enamel and leave it more prone to erosion during brushing. Wait about 20 to 30 minutes before brushing your teeth.

"Saliva has the ability to buffer or neutralise weak acids in the mouth. It will gradually clear out the residual acid and lay down new calcium to repair patches of teeth that got dissolved during this time frame," said Dr See Toh.

When you brush your teeth, do not brush them aggressively.

Some people like to brush very hard, said Dr Heng. "They want to keep their teeth very clean so they will scrub very hard. But that will traumatise the gums. Over time, it will cause the gums to recede."

Brush gently and spend at least three minutes brushing and flossing your teeth each time.

However, no matter how well you brush, you will still have to visit the dentist for routine check-ups to make sure you do not have any oral problems. Some of them, like early decay, do not display clear symptoms in the beginning.



PHOTO: AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

Acidic drinks, such as wine, soften the teeth's enamel surface and make your teeth more vulnerable to further abrasion and attrition.

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Fans on their dental care regimens

Plaque removal is vital for healthy gums and teeth. I achieve this with an electric toothbrush, which I use for at least two minutes each time.

I also floss my teeth every night, rinse my mouth after every meal and clean my tongue.

A visit to the dentist every six months to ensure compliance with oral hygiene methods is a must.

I also avoid sweet and sticky foods and aerated drinks. I read up on dental articles or visit a patient education forum to keep up with the latest techniques on maintaining good oral hygiene.

Dolna Saldanha

I use an anti-bacterial mouth-rinse after every meal. At night, I floss my teeth and use a damp cloth to clean my tongue.

I watch for swollen, reddish gums which may signal an infection.

I visit the dentist two or three times a year. I also pay attention to my diet, making sure that I cut back on sugar and incorporate calcium-enriched foods, such as milk, cheese and tofu.

Grace Sin

When I visited the dentist last year, he told me I had 11 cavities and periodontitis, which is irreversible. That was the result of not flossing my teeth and not getting a dental check-up every six months.

I now do that. I also try to minimise my teeth coming into contact with sugar by drinking juice through a straw.

Ming Yuan

I use dental floss at night. My dentist tells me that we can skip the oral cleaning regimen in the morning, but never before we sleep.

I am using a fluoride toothpaste for dry mouth as I find it helps to increase saliva secretion. It is also less harsh

than a whitening toothpaste.
Chen Huishan

I make sure I floss and brush my teeth regularly. I also clean my tongue and visit the dentist every six months.

I am health conscious and tend to consume fruits or juices throughout the day. The most important thing is to rinse my mouth after having acidic fruits.

W Li Ting

I do not drink carbonated drinks.

Fizzy drinks may be fun to have but are bad for your teeth. Two ingredients – phosphoric acid and citric acid – give such drinks their "bite", but these also eat away the surface of your teeth.

Although the occasional carbonated drink is all right, a can or more a day will make your tooth enamel softer and more susceptible to cavities. I drink water instead, flavouring it with crushed berries or mint leaves.

TY Ngho

I hold my toothbrush at a 45-degree angle, pointed towards the gum line, and use gentle, short, circular motions. I brush each tooth about 10 to 15 times.

TN Ng

I practise oil pulling with coconut oil every morning. It involves swishing the oil in the mouth and then spitting it out. I have super white teeth, strong gums and no cavities.

Anupama Kannan

WINNER

Dolna Saldanha wins a \$50 shopping voucher for the best post. The winner should e-mail her full name, username, address, identity card number and contact number to shealth@sph.com.sg by Wednesday. Specify STMYB Facebook as the subject.

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Keeping your pearlies in tip-top condition

1 Use soft-bristled toothbrushes: When buying a toothbrush, choose one with soft bristles.

"When you brush your teeth, remember that you are also brushing soft gums," said Dr Edwin Heng, a periodontist at Specialist Dental Group (Gleneagles).

"If you use something hard against something soft, there will be trauma and the gums will start to recede."

It is also important to select the appropriate toothbrush size for your mouth to make sure that you can reach all of your teeth easily, said Dr See Toh Young Liang, a consultant at the prosthodontics unit at the department of restorative dentistry at National Dental Centre Singapore.

"If the head of the brush is too big, it may be difficult for you to reach the teeth at the back of your mouth."

A toothbrush with a rubber grip can be easier to hold, he added.

There are also trendy types, such as charcoal toothbrushes, but there is no evidence that they help with halitosis (bad breath), as claimed.

For those who have gum problems or very sensitive teeth, ultrasoft toothbrushes are a good option.

And people with arthritis or poor manual dexterity may find electric toothbrushes useful.

"This group will benefit from using electric toothbrushes as certain varieties that come with oscillating bristles, especially the ones that work in circular motions as well as back and forth, are as effective as manual brushing in removing plaque," said Dr See Toh.

2 Use three or four toothbrushes a year Do not stint on toothbrushes. Change them every three or four months, as toothbrush bristles will start to fray over time and will not be as effective in doing its job.

3 Use dental floss Flossing is the only way to get rid of the plaque from the areas between your teeth. These are the areas that your toothbrush cannot reach.

It is important to remove the plaque as it generates acid that will lead to cavities as well as gum disease.

4 Use a tongue scraper Whether or not you use a tongue scraper, it is important to clean the tongue.

"This helps to remove bacteria,



PHOTO: THE NEW YORK TIMES
Picking the right toothbrush is important. Factors to consider include type of bristles, size and its grip.

decaying food debris, fungi and dead cells from the surface of the tongue which also contribute to halitosis," said Dr See Toh.

You can clean your tongue with the coarse back surface of some toothbrushes or tongue scrapers, though the latter may be a better choice.

Dr See Toh said: "Tongue scrapers have been shown to be more effective than toothbrushes in reducing levels of compounds on the tongue that cause halitosis."

Apart from hard plastic or stainless steel ones, tongue scrapers with soft bristles are now available in the market.

5 Use the right toothpaste Choose a low abrasion toothpaste if you have sensitive teeth, a result of dentine exposure.

"There are tiny channels in the dentine that contain nerve endings leading to the pulp," said Dr See Toh. The pulp is the tooth's soft core which contains blood vessels and nerves.

"Toothpaste for sensitive teeth work by blocking these channels and stabilising the nerve in the tooth as they seal the dentin surface (a layer below the enamel protecting the dental pulp)."

To see benefits, long-term continuous usage is required, he added.