

# Sugar and your Teeth

*Submitted by Dr. Jane Wright*



It's sugar season. Stores start selling Halloween candy weeks before the holiday, so we stock up in preparation for the throngs of trick-or-treaters. But you know that the candy is in the cupboard, and you're just going to take one piece. Okay, maybe two. Before you know it, a whole bag is gone and it's not even Halloween yet. Then the leftover or collected candy lingers through November and suddenly it's Thanksgiving. Now we have candy AND pies! How delightful! St. Nicholas comes for some at the beginning of December and Hanukkah, and Christmas bring even more goodies. The cookies, candy, and sweets are irresistible. It's the holidays!

Our poor teeth (and waistlines)! The obvious answer is to not eat the sugar, but come on, we deserve a little treat now and then. Prior to all the sugary treats thousands of years ago, early humans didn't brush their teeth and skeletal remains show many full, beautiful dentitions with no evidence of decay. Cavemen rarely got cavities! Early people ate meat and vegetables: low decay-causing foods. Once we started eating sugar, things began to go downhill for our teeth. Pair that with an acidic beverage like wine or soda, and our teeth are in real trouble. Streptococcus mutans is the bacteria that thrives on sucrose and eats our teeth in its path. No sugar? No cavities.

The unfortunate thing is that many carbohydrates break down into sugar: crackers, bread, pretzels, etc. Even if the food isn't "sweet," strep mutans can still use it. The bacteria live in the leftover food on our teeth called plaque, which hides around dental appliances and in pockets near our teeth. There are special brushes and flossers to help reach these sneaky places, and it's important to make the effort. Mouthwashes like Listerine kill the bacteria, and some artificial sweeteners like Xylitol can cause bacterial populations to decrease, which also reduces cavities. Adding a neutralizing toothpaste is also helpful (like one with baking soda) because oral bacteria prefer to live in an acidic environment. Decrease the acid, reduce the damage.

So as you reach for that delightful holiday treat, remember to brush and floss after. Or test your willpower and just walk away.

