

These habits are good for your health but bad for your teeth

WEAPONS *of* MOUTH DESTRUCTION

BY LISA BENDALL

I'VE ALWAYS BEEN diligent about brushing my teeth at least twice a day. (Who doesn't love a minty-fresh smile?) But six or seven years ago, I learned that my technique was sorely lacking. I tended to rush through the job, scrubbing furiously,

and after decades of overly vigorous cleaning, my teeth had developed an uncomfortable sensitivity to heat and cold. My dental hygienist explained that the enamel, or protective layer, was wearing thin and exposing the more sensitive dentine



underneath. Among her suggestions: brush gently up and down rather than aggressively, and take your time—at least two minutes.

“It’s a very typical example,” says Dr. Euan Swan, manager of dental programs at the Canadian Dental Association. “A patient is proud of the fact that they’re brushing so hard, but they’re damaging their teeth.”

When we first develop habits to improve our well-being, we aren’t always aware of the problems they could cause for our pearly whites. “Teeth tend to be a lower priority in terms of health, so some things tend to get missed,” says Dr. Mark Parhar, an endodontist in Port Moody, B.C., who specializes in the soft inner tissues of the teeth. Here are seven healthy practices that could be trashing your teeth—and how to stop the damage.

1. BRUSHING AFTER YOU EAT

Does your morning routine include grabbing a toothbrush immediately after breakfast? Kudos to you for brushing regularly, but your timing needs tweaking. When you consume something acidic, like oranges or tomatoes, the enamel temporarily softens and becomes susceptible to abrasive wear. If you brush your teeth, especially forcefully, you can remove enamel, which will leave your chompers feeling sensitive. It gets

worse as you get older, since your gums tend to recede with age and expose more root surface. (Tooth roots aren’t covered by enamel, but rather a thinner layer of a substance called cementum.)

If you want to exercise caution, wait approximately 30 minutes to brush. “Saliva is a buffering agent and will bring the acidity of the oral environment down, but it takes time,” says Gerry (Geraldine) Cool, a dental hygienist in Calgary and the president of the Canadian Dental Hygienists Association. Eating some types of dairy, especially cheddar cheese, can raise the pH inside the mouth and release calcium and other substances that fight plaque; and rinsing your mouth with water can help wash away debris wedged between teeth. You can also brush *before* eating something acidic instead of after.

2. TAKING MEDICATION (WHICH THEN CAUSES DRY MOUTH)

You may be diligent about controlling your chronic health condition by taking prescribed medications as directed. Unfortunately, if you’re on any one or more of the hundreds of drugs—including certain antidepressants and pain meds—that have the side effect of reducing saliva flow, your oral health could suffer. “Patients on those medications tend to have a dry mouth, so they’re at

a higher risk of developing tooth decay,” says Swan, “because the saliva isn’t there to physically wash food debris away or buffer acids.”



LEMON WATER MAY
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ACIDIC FRUIT JUICE
IS A MAJOR CULPRIT
WHEN IT COMES TO
DENTAL EROSION.

The solution isn’t to stop your medication, unless your doctor can offer an alternative without that side effect. Instead, try sipping water throughout the day. You can increase saliva flow with sugarless gum, mints containing xylitol, or sprays, gels and tablets designed specifically for dry mouth.

3. EXERCISING (WITHOUT DENTAL PROTECTION)

There are many ways physical activity benefits your body. It helps with cardiovascular health, weight control and mood management, for starters. Participating in impact sports such as ice hockey or martial arts, however, can do a number on your teeth if they aren’t properly protected. A custom mouthguard (fitted by a dentist) provides a cushion around your teeth in case of an impact to the face. They can be invaluable when there’s a risk of

physical contact, whether on the rink or on the basketball court.

“When you don’t wear a mouthguard, you see teeth chipping or being knocked out—damage that requires a lot of work to repair,” says Parhar, who has a background in sports dentistry.

Intense exercise may also affect the quantity and quality of your saliva. A 2015 study of triathletes in *The Scandinavian Journal of Medicine & Science in Sports* showed that when the athletes were active, their saliva flow slowed down while pH went up. Both changes can have a negative impact on teeth, which suggests that anyone active in sports should practise meticulous oral hygiene and seek regular dental care.

4. DRINKING LEMON WATER

Swigging water with fresh lemon juice is said to help digestion, strengthen immunity and cleanse your body of toxins. “I find it nice as a hot drink in the morning, especially when it’s cold out,” says 64-year-old Christine Peets of Napanee, Ont., who drinks lemon water throughout the day to calm her digestive issues and stay hydrated.

She became concerned, though, after her relative—also a fan of the drink—discovered it was weakening her tooth enamel, so Peets checked with her dental hygienist. Lemon water may be a popular trend, but acidic fruit juice is a major culprit

when it comes to dental erosion from diet. "Even though you're diluting lemon juice with water, you're still raising the acid level of the mouth. If you sip, and you're doing that two or three times throughout the day over a prolonged period of time, I'd be concerned," says Cool.

Peets's hygienist warned her to delay brushing right away after consuming lemon water, and also recommended trying toothpaste for sensitive teeth and brushing less forcefully. Drinking quickly is not a full fix, but it's much better than sipping the tart mixture at length; using a straw may also lessen detrimental effects. Check that the water isn't too hot, as warmer temperatures intensify the tooth damage. And if you're going to drink the acidic beverage, Cool suggests having a drink of plain, ordinary water soon afterwards.

5. CHEWING ON ICE

Ice is free of calories and sugar, will cool you down on a hot day, is usually pH-neutral and won't stick to your teeth. Isn't crunching ice much more wholesome, therefore, than chewing on candy? Turns out it has its downsides. "Ice is very hard," says Dr. Hendrike van Drie, a periodontist in Maastricht, the Netherlands, and chair of the oral-health working group at the Council of European Dentists. "Chewing on it damages teeth by causing cracks and fractures in enamel and

restorations." Van Drie adds that constant exposure to cold temperatures can lead to dentine hypersensitivity.



FLUORIDATED TAP
WATER REDUCES
TOOTH DECAY IN
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IT'S ALSO COST-
EFFECTIVE AND SAFE.

"I've got a few ice chewers in my practice, and I'm always encouraging them to break that habit. You just don't want to crunch hard things," says Cool. "The enamel is probably the hardest tissue in our bodies, but when there's chronic wear and tear, there's an increased chance that it can flatten the contours of the teeth." Sometimes the wear is severe enough to change the way the bite fits together, triggering pain in jaw muscles. She says ice can be nice, but only if you let it melt in your mouth.

6. SIPPING WINE SLOWLY

It's true that alcohol in moderation may offer benefits, including reducing the risk of diabetes, heart attack or stroke. Red wine, in particular, contains compounds that seem to raise good cholesterol and boost your heart health. But if spreading out your drinking means you're nursing a single glass

of wine for two hours, your teeth are being constantly compromised.

It's similar to the problem with lemon water. "Sipping wine means an exposure to acid every time a sip is taken," van Drie says. That's not to say you should chug-a-lug, but do drink water when you're having a glass of wine, or nibble on a piece of cheese to buffer the acid. And note that not all wines pose the same problems for your teeth. "White wine has a higher pH and causes more and faster damage," says van Drie. On the other hand, red can stain your pearly whites. Thinking of switching to Perrier instead? "Sparkling water is also acidic and can harm teeth when drunk constantly."

7. OPTING FOR SPRING WATER

According to Statistics Canada, approximately one in five Canadian households turns to bottles instead of taps as the main source of drinking water. Certainly, water is a much better go-to beverage than sugary pop or juice, but if bottled spring water is the only kind you drink, you might be missing out on a potential 25 per cent reduction in tooth decay.

Fluoridated tap water is endorsed by health organizations

such as the World Health Organization, Health Canada and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. It's well proven to reduce tooth decay in both children and adults; it's cost-effective; and it's safe (levels are low and monitored, and it's impossible to drink enough tap water to reach fluoride toxicity).

Currently, around 37 per cent of Canadians have access to fluoride in their tap water. Even though not everyone takes advantage of it, we all stand to benefit, says Swan. "When you drink fluoridated water, it gets into your system, so your saliva has a low level of fluoride in it that's constantly benefiting your teeth." It's

especially protective for older people with exposed root surface that's more vulnerable to decay.

Try to drink at least some tap water every day—you can use filters, as long as they're not the type that removes fluoride. Residents of communities without fluoridated water can consider adding fluoride drops, available by prescription, to the water. If you're in a rural area, have your water tested to find out its mineral composition and then adjust as needed. **R**

