

Tooth Erosion: Are Your Teeth Wearing Thin?

We all know that too much sugar is not good for our teeth, and that too much of the sweet stuff can lead to not-so-sweet results. Sugary snacks, like cookies, candy, and cake, can cause tooth decay. Even sugary beverages, like soda, fruit juice, and sports drinks, contain more sugar than you think (a serving of regular soda can contain as much as 10 teaspoons of sugar). But even if you switch to sugar-free soft drinks, you are putting your teeth at risk. You may not be aware that another ingredient commonly found in soft drinks and some food—acid—can cause serious damage, as well. So one of the best ways to keep your natural teeth healthy is to be aware of just what you're putting into your mouth.

Acid can be found naturally in many of the foods you eat, such as citrus fruits, tomatoes, and pickles, and it is also present in many beverages you drink, such as soda, juice, wine, and coffee. With Americans consuming an average of 46 gallons of soft drinks a year, according to the Academy of General Dentistry (AGD), these beverages are the main culprits for something called tooth erosion. Most soft drinks—even diet—contain phosphoric acid and citric acid. These acids wear down the enamel on your teeth, causing them to become discolored, sensitive, and cracked. While dental treatments, such as teeth whitening and veneers, can cosmetically address the problem, this condition is permanent. Once tooth enamel is gone, it is gone forever.

Saliva plays a protective role by diluting and neutralizing potentially erosive agents, especially phosphoric and citric acids, according to the American Dental Association (ADA). In this way, saliva may serve as a natural defense to reduce exposure to the acids that can demineralize enamel and root surfaces. Normally, your teeth will remineralize after exposure to acid, but continual exposure to acid does not give the tooth's enamel time to reharden. Over time, thinning of the tooth enamel can lead to tooth sensitivity and, more seriously, tooth loss.

If you drink a lot of soda, coffee, or other beverages with high acid content, you are at risk for tooth erosion. According to the AGD, early signs of this irreversible damage include: sensitivity to hot and/or cold food and beverages; slight yellowing of the teeth; and a rounded "sandblasted" appearance. More severe tooth erosion is indicated by: transparency of

tooth edges; darker yellow coloring of the teeth; extreme sensitivity to hot and cold; and small dents on the surface of the teeth.

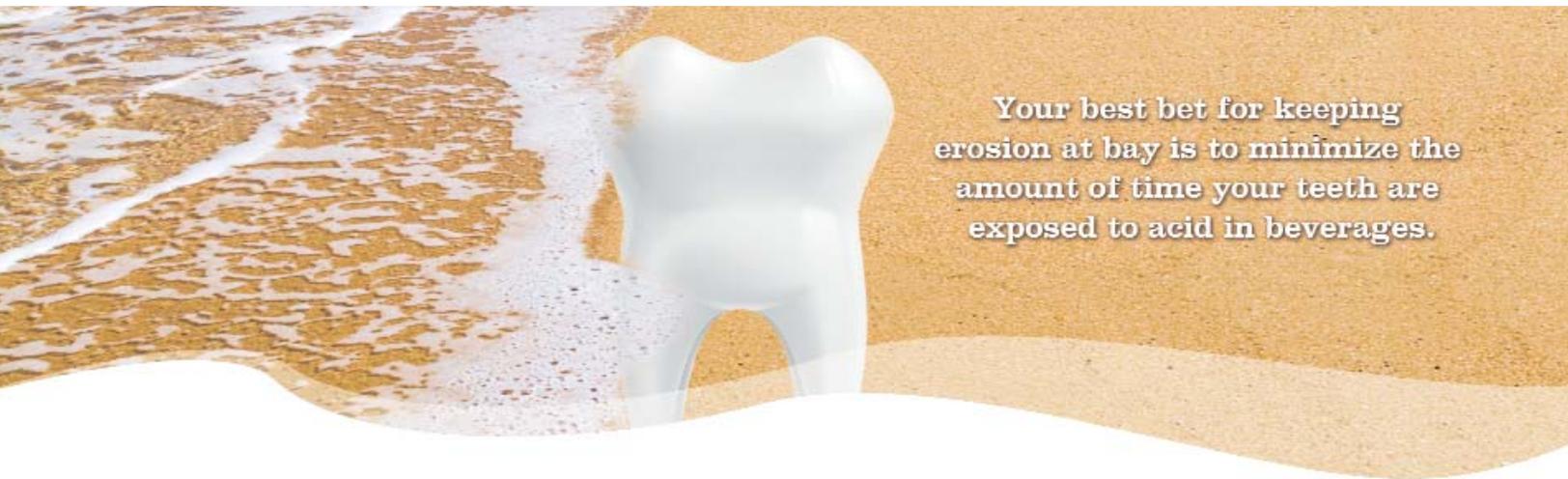
Biological factors, such as low salivary flow, bulimia, acid reflux disease, and other gastrointestinal conditions, can also affect tooth erosion, according to the ADA. So if you suffer from any of these conditions, you'll want to pay extra attention to the condition of your teeth and let your dentist know so he or she can advise you as to extra precautions to take.

Give Your Teeth a "Time-Out"—From Acidic Beverages

While tooth erosion is a permanent condition, there are toothpastes available that are designed to reharden tooth enamel to make it more resistant to acid attack. But your best bet for keeping erosion at bay, according to the AGD, is to minimize the amount of time your teeth are exposed to acid in beverages. You should limit the amount of acidic beverages that you consume, including soft drinks, coffee, and wine. If you do continue to consume these beverages, try to drink them quickly. Don't let the liquid linger in your mouth for too long, as that increases the amount of time acid has to attack your enamel. Using a straw when you drink soft drinks and juices will reduce the amount of contact that the acid in these drinks have with your teeth, because it directs the beverage to the back of your mouth.

You want to do everything you can to limit your chances of tooth erosion, so make sure you rinse your mouth out with water as soon as possible after consuming acidic beverages and food. You can also pop in a piece of sugar-free gum to help increase the flow of saliva and keep the acids from doing damage, or eat a piece of cheese to neutralize the acid. But interestingly enough, brushing your teeth right after consuming acidic beverages or food isn't as effective as you might think, according to the AGD. When your teeth are exposed to acid, it softens the enamel on the teeth, and the action of brushing softened enamel can further damage it. If you have any concerns that your teeth could be in jeopardy of erosion, make an appointment with your dentist immediately.

For more information on tooth erosion and your oral health, contact the Massachusetts Dental Society at (800) 342-8747 or visit www.massdental.org.



Your best bet for keeping erosion at bay is to minimize the amount of time your teeth are exposed to acid in beverages.