Eat Healthy to Curb Pandemic Weight Gain and Have a Healthy Smile

As of March, when the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic forced many states—including Massachusetts—to issue stay-at-home orders and millions of Americans to quarantine, many people's way of life changed dramatically. Schools and offices were shut down, and non-essential businesses—such as gyms and fitness centers—were shuttered to help flatten the curve and slow the spread of the disease. This has been a stressful time, with infection rates in some states increasing at an alarming rate and the prospect of the arrival of a vaccine looking like later rather than sooner. Everyone deals with stress differently, and for many Americans that has meant turning to "comfort foods" to ease anxiety. Snack food manufacturers have seen their sales skyrocket, with the *New York Times* reporting that cookie and cracker sales shot up by nearly 30% in the early days of the pandemic. A survey by the International Food Information Council found that in the first month of the pandemic, 27% of respondents said they were snacking more. With fitness centers and gyms closed and people couch-bound early on in the pandemic, this combination of eating more and moving less has led to what some jokingly refer to as gaining "the COVID-19" (a pun on the "Freshman 15" weight gain that college students often struggle with during the first few months away from home). But this situation is far from a laughing matter.

While these are incredibly stressful times, it's important that we stay as healthy as possible. A poor diet can lead not only to weight gain, but also to high blood pressure, digestive problems, and increased risk of illnesses. According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, people with certain health conditions like obesity, heart conditions, type 2 diabetes, and high blood pressure are at an increased risk of severe illness from COVID-19. For years now, research has pointed to a link between periodontal (gum) disease and cardiovascular disease and stroke, which is why it's important now more than ever that you maintain good oral health. And that includes being mindful of what you put in your mouth, because oral health is overall health.

When you eat anything, the bacteria naturally present in your mouth convert a food's sugar and starch into acids, which attack the enamel on your teeth and cause tooth decay. The more often you eat foods that contain sugars and starches, and the longer these foods remain in your mouth before you brush your teeth, the greater your risk for tooth decay. That's why it's important to brush your teeth after every meal, ideally, to brush away any food particles that may be clinging to or stuck in between your teeth.

For good oral and overall health, keep these guidelines in mind:

- Limit the amount of sugary and starchy foods you consume, especially between meals when you are least likely to brush after eating. If you do snack between meals, brush with fluoride toothpaste as soon as possible.
- Read the nutritional labels on the foods you buy, and watch out for how much hidden sugar and starch you are actually consuming.
- Snack on healthier fare, like cheese, vegetables, and fruit. Crunchy fruit contains sugar but also has a high-water content, which dilutes the effects of the sugar and stimulates the flow of saliva, an aid in washing away food particles.
- Watch what you drink. Try to limit your intake of soda and fruit juices, and drink plenty of water, which will help rinse any food particles from between your teeth. And if you're drinking bottled water, pay close attention to what's in—or isn't in—the water, because not all bottled water contains fluoride, which is proven to prevent cavities.
- Take a daily multivitamin to ensure that you are getting all the nutrients your body needs. Calcium and vitamin D are essential for good tooth and bone development.