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What is dental erosion?

Your teeth are covered by enamel, which is hard but can be damaged. If your teeth are exposed to acidic food or liquids over time, enamel can be lost. This process is called dental erosion.[1]

WHERE DOES THE ACID THAT CAUSES DENTAL EROSION COME FROM?

Common sources of acids associated with dental erosion[2,3] include acidic food and drinks, acid reflux, and vomiting.

Acidic food and drinks. Dental erosion is associated acidic food and drinks. For example, eating acidic fruits more than twice a day, drinking soda every day, or drinking sports drinks once a week may contribute to dental erosion.[4]

Acid reflux. During acid reflux, acid is forced out of the stomach and back into the mouth. People who have untreated acid reflux for a long time may be at risk for dental erosion.[2]

Vomiting. Repeated vomiting over a period can put you at risk for dental erosion.[2]

WHAT SHOULD YOU WATCH FOR?

Early signs of dental erosion are shallow pits on your teeth, a flattening of your back teeth, or both.[5] As more enamel is lost, the dentin is exposed, which can cause changes in how your teeth look and can cause tooth pain.[6,7]

Tooth appearance. You may notice that your front teeth appear to shorten or start to look yellow.

Tooth pain. Dentin is sensitive, so you may experience sharp tooth pain when, for example, your teeth are touched or the temperature in the mouth changes to hot or cold.

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

Unfortunately, once enamel is lost, it cannot be replaced. But you can take the following steps to prevent or stop dental erosion: drink water or milk while eating; avoid eating or drinking acidic food or beverages; if you drink acidic beverages, use a straw placed behind your front teeth, and don't swish the liquid around or hold it in your mouth; rinse your mouth with water or milk after vomiting, eating acidic food, or drinking acidic beverages; and if possible, wait at least 1 hour before brushing your teeth after vomiting, eating acidic food, or drinking acidic beverages.[3,8-10]

Here are other tips to think about.

- Chewing sugar-free gum can increase saliva flow, which helps remove acid.
- Use a soft-bristle brush and fluoride toothpaste when you brush your teeth.
- Look for products that have the American Dental Association Seal of Acceptance to help prevent or reduce enamel erosion from dietary acids. The Seal means an independent group of scientific experts has agreed that the products are safe and effective when used as directed.

CONCLUSION

Dental erosion is caused by repeatedly exposing your teeth to acid over time. Talk to your dentist if you think you are at risk of developing dental erosion. You can work with him or her to map out a plan to keep your enamel healthy and your smile looking great. ■

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"For the Patient" provides general information on dental treatments. It is designed to prompt discussion between dentist and patient about treatment options and does not substitute for the dentist's professional assessment based on the individual patient's needs and desires.

You can find more information for patients at ADAcatalog.org or at MouthHealthy.org.

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