

Teaching matters

Promoting oral health in the classroom

Oral health impacts our overall health and wellbeing. A healthy mouth allows us to speak, smile, taste, chew, and swallow, and it builds self-esteem too. When oral health is neglected, it leads to tooth decay and other oral diseases.

Tooth decay is the most common childhood disease and although preventable, affects many children (approximately 486 million worldwide), particularly those from disadvantaged social backgrounds. It interferes with children's growth and mental development by hampering concentration and school participation, as children with tooth decay are 12 times more likely to struggle in school due to poor oral health.

Tooth decay and treatment are traumatic for a child – it may result in pain, lead to infection, and result in hospitalisation and extraction of teeth under general anaesthetic (GA). In Ireland, around 7,000 children are referred each year through the HSE for dental extractions under GA.

Causes of tooth decay

Frequent consumption of sugary foods and drinks causes tooth decay. Free sugars are the main issue, which are sugars that are added to foods (e.g., cakes, biscuits, breakfast cereals, jams, pasta sauce) and drinks, (e.g. fizzy drinks, sports/energy drinks, and fruit juices). It also includes sugar naturally present in honey, syrups, fruit juice, and fruit juice concentrates. It does not refer to sugar that is naturally present in whole fruits, vegetables, and milk.

Tooth loss or toothache can prevent children from enjoying a healthy diet. A balanced diet that includes fruit and vegetables is an important part of maintaining a healthy mouth and a healthy body. Therefore, it is important to encourage children to make healthy choices and limit their sugar intake –

especially from snacking in-between meals.

Initiatives like the Hot School Meals Programme are important for children's nutrition and wellbeing, especially for those who suffer from food poverty or from the most disadvantaged backgrounds. The nutrition standards for this programme state that confectionery like chocolate, cakes, and biscuits must not be served and that water and milk are the best options as they are tooth-friendly.

Recommended sugar intake

The World Health Organisation (WHO) recommends a sugar intake of less than six teaspoons of free sugar per day, for reduced tooth decay, even when fluoride is used. Fizzy drinks contain a lot of sugar – a 330ml can of cola contains about nine teaspoons of sugar, while a chocolate bar has about seven teaspoons of sugar. It is easy to see how unhealthy snacks could take up your entire recommended daily allowance.

Oral health for children needs to be given more priority. It is an important part of daily self-care including eating healthy food, less sugar, and good oral hygiene.

Teachers can play a role in this as they are an important influence in children's lives. You can empower children to take care of their mouths and to be beware the foods and drinks that can harm their teeth and body. It is also important to involve parents/carers by encouraging children to share oral health information with them so that parents/carers can help their children with healthy lunchboxes and practice good oral health at home.

Integration of nutrition and health literacy

Improving health literacy is central to better health outcomes, including in



educational settings. The WHO recommends the “integration of nutrition and health literacy and practical skills into the core curriculum” of schools. Children's teeth can be given a good start by empowering kids to choose sugar-free snacks and drinks, brushing their teeth twice a day using fluoride toothpaste, and visiting the dentist at least once a year.

The Dental Health Foundation ensures that oral health information and guidelines for both children and adults are communicated appropriately and that messaging is simple, understandable and delivered in an accessible manner to all.

We have oral health postcards with helpful tips for parents/carers/teachers as well as posters, brushing charts and fun games that are suitable for the classroom. These resources give all the information needed to support teachers in getting children to practice good oral care and establish long-lasting habits and are free to order from our website: www.dentalhealth.ie.

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