



## Managing the Acid in Your Diet

Do you like diet soda as much as I do? If so, read on. The next time you reach for a soda (diet or regular) there is a lot more to consider than just the calorie content.

As you may recall from high school chemistry, pH is the measure of acidity in a particular substance. A pH of 7 is considered neutral; if a liquid has a pH below 7, then it is considered acidic. As we know, the presence of acid in our saliva can be a factor in the erosion of healthy tooth enamel.

Low pH can be associated with a number of factors including diet, medications and family history. Of all of these, diet is by far the most important. Carbohydrates and sugars found in many processed foods mix with bacteria inside your mouth and contribute to the process of enamel breakdown.

It is not only what you eat (or drink), but also how often you expose your teeth to sugar that matters. Consuming food or drinks, with high amounts of sugar, multiple times a day, prolongs exposure of the teeth to the harmful effects of acid build-up. With frequent exposures to the acids produced from sugars and carbohydrates, saliva has less time to return to balanced pH levels and buffer the impact of acid production. If you must eat processed foods, or sweets, or sodas, it is best if you can limit your intake to 1 or 2 times during the day. It is even better if you can brush your teeth after consuming these foods or drinks—or at least rinse your mouth with water to get rid of the acid.

Are you one of the many people on medication that causes dry mouth? If so, dry mouth makes you more vulnerable to the harmful effects of acid, as you may not have sufficient saliva to wash away the acid build up. If you are on one of these medications, it is especially important that you watch your intake of sugary and/or acidic foods and drink.

Have a teenage boy in the family? They are major consumers of sports and energy drinks, which also tend to reduce the pH of saliva. The same rules—infrequent exposure and frequent rinsing, should apply to the ingestion of these drinks. There are multiple strategies that can help to reduce the risk related to consuming these drinks. You can suggest that your teenager read the label and choose the drink with the lowest sugar content; or you can suggest that he (or she) drink through a straw, which lessens the tooth exposure; or better yet, you can suggest switching to a flavored water with a low sugar content.

The media bombards all of us with messages that promote the consumption of processed foods and acidic and/or sugary drinks. By arming yourself with knowledge, you can better manage the side effects of these foods and drinks on your health. So, the next time you reach for a soda, stop and think about what you can do to reduce its potential impact on your salivary pH. Or better yet, trade that soda for a glass of water.

- Dr. Randi Tillman