

Don't Be Goblin' Too Much Candy

Let's face it, Halloween is special. It's a time for indulging your fantasies in costumes and your "sweet tooth" in candy. And while gobblin' too much candy can be ghoulish on your child's dental health, some moderation and attention can prevent your little pumpkin's healthy smile from turning into a jack-o-lantern's toothless grin.

With some awareness and a little effort, Halloween treat eaters can satisfy their candy cravings while preventing dental problems and obesity at the same time. With rare exception, candy and chocolates are Halloween treats that can fit into any nutritionally balanced diet or lifestyle. Eaten in moderation and slowly gobbled up over the course of several days, those treats can add fun and flavor to snack food choices. The American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry recommends limiting snacking to no more than three or four times a day. Snacking more frequently increases the risk for tooth decay. Every time food contacts teeth, bacteria in the mouth have the opportunity to create acids that last for twenty minutes or more, dissolving enamel.

Some research indicates that certain snacks, such as cheddar cheese, peanuts, sugar-free gum, and even dark chocolate, may be "friendly" to the teeth. Eating these foods along with or after foods that contain carbohydrates, sugars, and starches may help to counter the effects of the acids produced by bacteria in the mouth. And parents, don't forget these foods when choosing your trick-or-treat give-aways. Other healthy treats are potato chips, pretzels, popcorn, and fresh fruit. Foods that are sticky or gooey have more potential to cause cavities. Avoiding treats such as caramels, fruit roll-ups, bubble gum, and tootsie rolls makes good sense.

A report from the Surgeon General estimates that 50% of all 5-9 year olds have at least one cavity or filling. Another report from the Center for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that 15% of all 6-9 year olds are overweight. But these scary numbers don't have to cause a frightening Halloween. Good dental health mirrors good overall health and since much of today's medical attention is focused on childhood obesity, parents are encouraged to sort through their child's goodies looking for both the less sweet and less fatty snack foods. Children on well-balanced diets are getting the proteins, vitamins, and minerals, especially calcium and phosphorous, needed to build strong teeth and to help resist tooth decay and gum disease.

Above all, remember that good dental health depends on more than just diet. During this Halloween and all year long, be sure your children brush their teeth every morning and again before bedtime. Don't let them go to sleep with snack food left on their teeth. Most children need some parental help with brushing until age 8 and flossing until 10 years old. Select a fluoride containing toothpaste that has the American Dental Association's Seal of Approval. And finally, it is important that your children have professional dental check-ups every six months to create smiles that last a lifetime.

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