

# Dental Decay

## How does dental (tooth) decay happen?



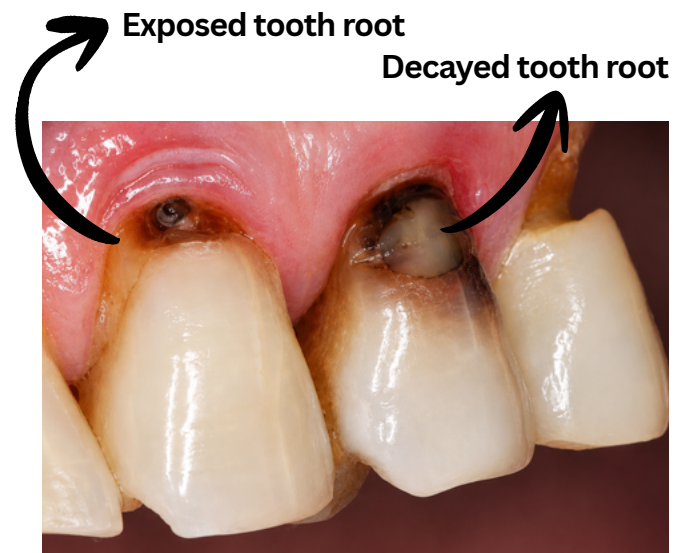
**Plaque (bacteria in the mouth)** + **sugar (simple or starches)** = an **acidic** environment

The mouth becomes an acidic environment every time food is eaten. The acidic environment can soften tooth enamel (outer layer of the teeth) for up to 20 minutes after eating. The combination of plaque and sugar in an acidic environment causes **dental decay** (also called dental caries or cavities).

### Risk Factors:

- Poor oral hygiene (practice of keeping the mouth healthy (e.g., brushing)
- Eating sugary foods often or for a long time (e.g. sucking on a hard candy)
- Having one or more cavities
- Dry mouth (less saliva)
- Food or drink left in the mouth after meals

**Individuals with dementia are at higher risk of dental decay** because it is harder for them to clean their teeth well, oral care can be challenging, mouth problems are found late, and they may have trouble swallowing.



### Most Common Signs & Symptoms:

- Pitted brown or white spots on teeth
- Exposed or decayed teeth roots
- Tooth pain

### When to Seek Care:

- Any symptoms
- Toothache lasting more than 2–4 weeks



### How to Help:

- Brush your teeth every day with high fluoride toothpaste
- Use different fluoride products. For more details, see the **Fluoride Products** sheet
- Lower how long teeth are exposed to sugar
- Brush your teeth within 30 minutes after eating. If not possible, rinse your mouth with water or chew sugar-free gum

- Hard, crunchy, low sugar foods, like vegetables, can help remove plaque.
- Non-acidic foods, like cheese, can help lower acid in the mouth.
- Use sugar-free gums or mints instead of sugary snacks. Some sugar-free products are made with **xylitol**, which can help slow bacteria growth.

