



## Dr. Kaitlynn's Advanced Cavity Control Tips

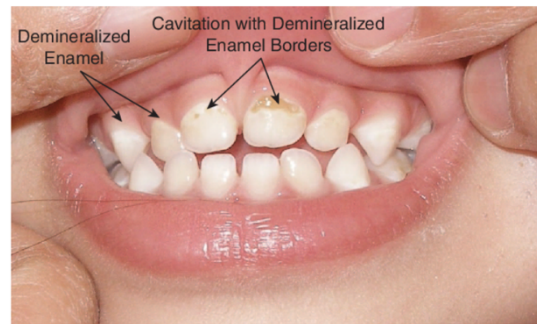
To prevent cavities, it helps to first understand what they are and how they form. Cavities develop when bacteria in plaque that live in our mouths feed and break down sugar in our diets. Similarly to humans, the bacteria excrete out a byproduct after they eat these sugars. The byproduct they produce and release onto our teeth is acid. While teeth can naturally resist small amounts of acid, repeated and prolonged exposure overwhelms this defense, leading to breakdown of enamel and eventual tooth decay.

*Two of the most important ways to control cavities:*

- 1) Effective plaque removal by regular brushing with good mechanical technique, along with flossing to remove plaque in the areas the toothbrush doesn't reach. Overall, this lowers the amount of bacteria and prevents plaque from sitting on a tooth for long periods of time.
- 2) Managing the frequency and duration of sugar intake and exposure.

In their earliest stage, cavities appear as enamel demineralization, often seen as chalky white spots – think of these as pre-cavities. At this point, damage can still be reversed with good home care and sugar control. If ignored, these spots progress into soft, orange-brown cavities that require treatment.

Cavities can form anywhere on a tooth but are most common in areas that are hard to clean or where saliva doesn't reach. High-risk spots include along the gumline, deep grooves of molars, and between teeth where only floss can reach. Saliva plays a vital protective role—it contains minerals and natural antimicrobials that help neutralize acid and strengthen enamel.



**FIGURE 369-1** Demineralization and early cavitation.

Fluoride is one of the most effective tools we have against tooth decay as well. Fluoride helps strengthen enamel as it is incorporated into the tooth structure to make enamel harder and more resistant to acid attacks. Fluoride helps “remineralize” weakened enamel, repairing white chalky spots before they turn into cavities. Fluoride can also slow down the acid production from bacteria by interfering with the enzymes the bacteria need for sugar breakdown.

It's important to recognize that tooth decay is a preventable disease. What makes dental decay challenging is that cavities are caused or exacerbated by a long list of factors. Some are factors we have control over and some we do not. While genetics may make some people more cavity-prone, no one is destined to develop them. Even those with a strong family history can prevent decay with excellent oral hygiene and careful sugar control. For example, someone who eats only vegetables, nuts, meat, and water—while brushing regularly—will rarely experience new cavities if their enamel is healthy.

Even though a family history or genetic predisposition to cavities is a factor out of our control, it cannot be used as an excuse when other controllable factors can be kept in check. Think of cavity formation as a balance of risk factors, like a teeter-totter. Some people may have to work harder to keep their balance, but with consistent care and lifestyle choices, a healthy mouth is still achievable.

Factors we can control:	Factors we cannot control:
<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Sugary drink intake (juice, soda, sweet tea, chocolate milk, etc.)</li><li>2. Acidic drink intake (energy drinks, sports drinks, soda, etc.)</li><li>3. Brushing technique and frequency</li><li>4. Flossing consistency</li><li>5. Fluoride exposure in water and toothpaste</li><li>6. Snacking frequency and types of snacks (candies, processed foods, sticky foods-chips, crackers, fruit snacks, etc.)</li><li>7. Regular dental cleanings and check-ups</li></ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Enamel strength and quality</li><li>2. Saliva quality</li><li>3. Genetic resistance to cavities</li><li>4. Type of bacteria in our mouth</li><li>5. Stickiness of plaque buildup</li><li>6. Deep grooves and pits</li><li>7. Crowded teeth (unrelated to pacifier use or thumb-sucking)</li></ol>

## **Building Healthy Habits to Prevent Cavities**

Just like going to the gym, there are no quick fixes for oral health. Preventing cavities takes consistent, long-term habits. It requires teamwork between parents and kids—and sometimes the “tough love” of being the parent who enforces healthy routines.

Think about diaper changes: your baby might resist, but you still do it because keeping them clean is essential for their health. Brushing your child’s teeth works the same way—you’re helping clean away plaque and the sugary waste left behind by bacteria. These habits may not always be fun, but they are absolutely worth it for a lifetime of healthy smiles.

Below includes detailed tips to help families succeed:

- 1. Parents should stay in control of brushing.**  
Until at least age seven—and often longer—kids need hands-on help. Don’t just ask, “*Did you brush?*” Assume you’ll need to step in. Brushing should take two full minutes and cover all surfaces. A helpful approach is to start the brushing yourself, making sure fluoride toothpaste is spread over all areas, and then let your child finish up if they want to practice their independence. This way, they get the best of both worlds—effective cleaning and a sense of ownership.
- 2. Use proper pressure and technique.**  
Most kids do an okay job on the front teeth but miss the back molars, where about 90% of cavities form. Angle the toothbrush at 45° toward the gums and use firm, quick strokes, like erasing pencil marks. Baby teeth are resilient, so you don’t need to worry about brushing too hard. If brushing makes your child fussy, it usually means you’re doing it right!
- 3. Use fluoride toothpaste correctly.**  
“Training” or “natural” toothpastes without fluoride don’t protect against cavities. Start with a *tiny smear* of fluoride toothpaste when the first baby tooth erupts, always with parent supervision. By age three, a pea-sized amount is appropriate.
- 4. Reward good brushing habits.**  
Tools like brushing calendars, stickers, and sand timers can motivate kids. Nighttime brushing is the most critical—if you only manage one brushing a day, make it before bed. Parents should always check for missed spots, especially on back molars.
- 5. Use plaque disclosing tablets.**  
These chewable tablets stain plaque so kids can see where they’ve missed. They turn brushing into a fun science experiment and reinforce good habits.
- 6. Help with flossing.**  
Brushing and diet control prevent most cavities, but flossing is especially important for kids with tight molars or crowding. If flossing is a daily battle, consider adding a fluoride mouth rinse (like ACT). However, please remember the mouth rinse does not take the place of brushing and flossing. It’s vital to still do both to prevent cavities. The mouth rinse is an extra tip to use if needed!
- 7. Cut out sugary drinks.**  
Juices (even watered down), chocolate milk, Kool-Aid, sports drinks, and soda are leading causes of cavities. Kids don’t need them. Stick to water and plain milk. If flavor is a struggle, try sugar-free options like Crystal Lite, Mio, or Gatorade Zero. Using a straw can also help liquids bypass the teeth.
- 8. Don’t be an enabler.**  
Kids can’t buy groceries—parents can. If you don’t put sugary drinks and snacks in the cart, they won’t be in the house. Removing the option helps kids naturally reach for healthier choices like water.
- 9. Practice smart snacking.**  
Frequent snacking on processed carbs (crackers, chips, cookies) fuels cavity-causing bacteria. Instead, encourage whole foods like fresh fruits, veggies, cheese, nuts, and meats. These healthier choices don’t stick in the teeth the way processed snacks do.
- 10. Be a role model**  
Children love to imitate what they see. Let them watch you brush and floss so they understand it’s part of a normal daily routine. When you make home care fun and positive, your child is more likely to look forward to it and build healthy habits that last.

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