

Eating disorders and your teeth

If you have anorexia or bulimia you may experience some problems with your teeth. You might experience a sharp pain when you eat very hot, cold or sweet foods; you may get toothache, or perhaps your teeth have changed colour. Most of these problems are due to acid erosion of the surface of the teeth. This acid can come from two sources, either acidic food and drinks, or stomach acid as a result of vomiting.

Stomach acid can wear away the enamel layer of the tooth. This may lead to the pulp and nerve endings becoming exposed and the teeth may then have to be crowned or coated.

Frequent drinking of low calorie 'fizzy' drinks, 'sport/energy' drinks or fruit based drinks can also have similar effects because of the acid they contain. Constantly sipping these drinks can be particularly harmful to tooth enamel. Consider using a straw to direct the liquid past your teeth if you do consume a lot of fruit or 'fizzy' drinks.

A dry mouth (which be associated with excessive vomiting) means that food acids and the acids produced by bacteria in the mouth are not neutralised by saliva in the usual way. This makes teeth more vulnerable to acid attack and tooth decay (caries). Some tablets such as chewable Vitamin C can have a similar effect.

Care of your teeth

Scrubbing your teeth with toothpaste immediately after being sick is not advisable as this can damage the surface crystals on the enamel layer of the teeth, if your teeth are already weakened. Dentists who specialise in problems related to enamel erosion, advise rinsing your mouth thoroughly with milk or water, (or even better water and sodium bicarbonate) after being sick.

It is best to wait at least two hours before drinking or eating anything acidic, such as fruit or fizzy drinks, or before brushing your teeth. This enables the saliva to have a neutralising effect on the stomach acid which seeps into the surface enamel after vomiting.

Using a simple mouthwash containing Fluoride is another alternative. If you wish to brush your teeth after being sick, avoid using toothpaste, particularly 'smokers' toothpaste. You can use a toothbrush just with water.

Chewing sugar free chewing gum after meals can help to stimulate saliva production and counter some of the effects of a dry mouth.

Dentists

Although it can be difficult to talk about your eating disorder, it is a good idea to tell your dentist about your eating problem. Your dentist will be better placed to give you helpful advice, and to know how to help you protect your teeth from damage.

Go for regular check-ups at least every six months and more often if your gums bleed a lot. This is particularly important if you have a high frequency of bingeing and vomiting.



Further Information

Your local dentist may be able to refer you to a specialist restorative dentist if necessary. If you have problems that your own dentist is unable to help with, The British Society for Disability and Oral Health - www.bsodh.org.uk may also be able to help you.

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Sources used to create this information sheet are available by contacting Beat on 0300 123 3355 or info@b-eat.co.uk

Beat is the UK's leading charity supporting anyone affected by eating disorders or difficulties with food, weight and shape. Beat, Wensum House, 103 Prince of Wales Road, Norwich NR1 1DW
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