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The Massachusetts Dental Society (MDS) is pleased to make this publication available to our member dentists as a way of communicating important oral health information to their patients.

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Your comments and suggestions regarding **WORD OF MOUTH** are always welcome. All correspondence and requests for additional copies may be forwarded to:

Melissa Carman  
Director of Publications  
Massachusetts Dental Society  
Two Willow Street  
Southborough, MA 01745-1027

or email [mcarman@massdental.org](mailto:mcarman@massdental.org).

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- Robert E. Boose, EdD, *Executive Director*
  - Melissa Carman, *Director of Publications*
  - Jeanne Burdette, *Senior Graphic Design Specialist*
  - Shelley Padgett, *Senior Graphic Design Specialist*
  - Elizabeth Nilson, *Communications and Community Relations Coordinator*
  - Scott G. Davis, *Director of Strategic Communications*



# Cavity Conundrum

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**It's a cavity conundrum.** In the morning, you brush with fluoridated toothpaste and swish with antiseptic mouthwash. In the evening, you brush and floss. You may even go the extra mile to scrape the film off your tongue every day. And you definitely visit the dentist every six months to ensure your “chiclets” are in top form. But wait. What? A cavity? Why?

Cavities, a.k.a. tooth decay, are all too common in adults. More than 90% of us have had a cavity, and one in four of us has untreated cavities, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). But we don't all experience tooth decay for the same reasons.

Your degree of vulnerability to getting a cavity is influenced by multiple factors, not just your oral hygiene—although good oral hygiene is an important piece of the oral health puzzle. In addition to your daily health habits, those factors include your biology and social factors. Let's drill into some of the many causes of cavities.

## Family History

If you notice that, besides yourself, your family members seem to get a lot of cavities, you may come from a long line of ancestors with deep grooves on the surface of the teeth. These grooves, which are found mainly on the molars, are hereditary and can be a cavity-causing culprit since bacteria can easily be trapped in these crevices—and hard to remove. Consider talking to your dentist about dental sealants, which are thin, protective coatings that adhere to the chewing surface of your back teeth and smooth over these grooves.

## Mouth Acidity

The acidity level of your mouth may be less than ideal to protect your teeth from decay. Acid breaks down your enamel, so keeping your pH level in a neutral range is important for maintaining strong teeth that can remineralize when the enamel breaks down. You can influence your mouth's pH by reducing your consumption of acidic foods like soft drinks, coffee, nuts, and bread, and upping your intake of low-acidity foods like spinach, broccoli, blueberries, and avocados. It's also important to address with your doctor such disorders as gastroesophageal reflux disease, which can increase mouth acidity.

## Overcrowded Teeth

Overcrowded teeth can trap food, making it more difficult to get your teeth really clean and creating a breeding ground for the bacteria that cause cavities. This shifting of teeth is a natural process that can be traced back to our ancestors. Because early humans used their teeth more as tools and chewed tougher raw-food diets, their teeth would wear down significantly with age. As a result, shifting occurred to counteract the increased space between worn-down teeth. Modern humans no longer experience such extreme dental wear, but the shifting still occurs. Overcrowding can be addressed by an orthodontist and may require extractions, braces, or aligners to correct.

## Dry Mouth

Saliva washes away food and debris from teeth and gums, and provides disease-fighting substances that help prevent cavities and other infections. Certain medications, radiation treatments for cancers, autoimmune diseases, and hormonal changes during pregnancy and menopause can cause dry mouth, which is also known by its clinical name, xerostomia. To keep saliva flowing freely, be sure to drink plenty of water, chew sugarless gum, and ask your dentist about a hydrating oral rinse.

## Fluoride

Fluoride is a naturally occurring mineral found in water sources across the globe. When swallowed or applied to the teeth, fluoride helps prevent cavities by making the outer surface of teeth more resistant to the acid attacks that cause tooth decay. To make sure you're getting enough fluoride for oral health, drink fluoridated tap water (bottled water is rarely fluoridated). To see if your town's water supply is fluoridated, check the Community Water Fluoridation section at [massdental.org/fluoride](http://massdental.org/fluoride). You'll also want to use fluoridated toothpaste and mouthrinses.

## Healthy Diet

What you put in your body is not only essential for your overall health, but also for your oral health. Eating a healthy diet—low-fat dairy, whole grains, vegetables and fruit, and limited added sugar—abstaining from drinking alcohol, and avoiding cigarettes and other tobacco products are essential behaviors for preventing tooth decay and other oral diseases.

With this information, we hope that your cavity conundrum has been clarified. There is no silver bullet that prevents tooth decay for everyone. To prevent cavities, it's important to approach your oral health in ways that include, but also go beyond, daily oral care and your biannual visits to the dentist. Keep up these good habits, and adopt some others that could keep your grin glowing.