

Why Teenagers Get Cavities Even When They Brush

By JoD Family & Parenting · 6 min read

It is a frustrating conversation that plays out in a lot of family bathrooms. "You brush every day, so how did you get three cavities?" The teenager shrugs, equally baffled. From the outside it can look like someone is slacking, but the truth is that the teenage years come with a particular mix of factors that work against teeth, even for kids who are reasonably diligent.

Brushing is important, but it is only part of the picture. Diet, timing, orthodontics, saliva, and the simple fact that teenagers are running their own routines all play a role. Here is what tends to be going on, and what actually helps.

Brushing is not the whole story

A toothbrush cleans the broad surfaces of teeth well, but it misses the tight spaces between them, and that is exactly where many teenage cavities start. Cleaning between the teeth with floss or interdental brushes reaches the spots a brush cannot. For a lot of teens, this step is the first to disappear from the routine, if it was ever really there.

There is also the quality of brushing to consider. A quick thirty-second pass before running out the door is not the same as a thorough two minutes. A teenager can honestly believe they brush twice a day and still be leaving plenty behind.

The diet of a teenager

This is often the biggest factor, and the trickiest to influence. The issue is less about any single food and more about how often teeth are exposed to sugar and acid through the day.

Every time someone eats or drinks something sugary or starchy, bacteria in the mouth produce acid, and that acid softens enamel for a stretch afterward. Saliva eventually neutralizes it, but that takes time. A teenager who sips a sweet drink across a whole afternoon, or grazes on snacks between classes, keeps their teeth under near-constant acid pressure. The same amount of sugar eaten in one sitting would do less harm.

The usual culprits

- **Sports and energy drinks:** often both sugary and acidic, and frequently sipped slowly over long periods.
- **Sodas and sweetened iced coffees:** same problem, especially when they replace water through the day.
- **Constant snacking:** chips, candy, and granola bars grazed on between meals.
- **Late-night eating:** food after the last brush of the day sits on teeth overnight, when saliva flow drops and offers less protection.

You will not win by banning everything. More realistic wins: keep sweet and acidic drinks to mealtimes rather than all day, make water the default between meals, and encourage a glass of water to rinse after a treat.

Braces and aligners add a challenge

A lot of teenagers are in orthodontic treatment, and braces in particular create nooks around the brackets and wires where food and plaque collect. Cleaning thoroughly takes more time and the right tools, and it is easy to do a rushed job. Clear aligners come with their own trap: snacking or drinking anything but water with them in can bathe teeth in sugar under the tray.

If your teen is in treatment, extra attention to cleaning and a check that they are using any recommended brushes or floss threaders can make a real difference to how their teeth look when the braces come off.

Biology is not helping either

The permanent molars that come in during childhood and the early teen years have deep grooves on their chewing surfaces that trap food and are hard to clean. Newly erupted teeth are also still maturing and can be more vulnerable to decay in their first few years. On top of that, the independence of the teen years means parents simply supervise less, so lapses go unnoticed for longer.

Where regular visits come in

Many teenage cavities are small and painless when they start, which means they are easy to miss at home and easy to catch at a check-up. Routine visits let a dentist spot early decay, clean the spots a teen's brushing misses, and have a frank conversation with the teen directly, which sometimes lands better than another reminder from a parent. Keeping up [family dental care](#) through the teen years is one of the more reliable ways to keep small problems small. MiNa Family Dentistry in Thornhill is one example of a practice that sees patients across ages, which

can make it easier to keep the whole household on a consistent schedule. Because every teenager's risk is different, a dentist's assessment is the best guide to what a particular child needs.

What actually helps

- Make cleaning between teeth a real habit, not an afterthought; attaching it to an existing routine like showering can help.
- Shift sweet and acidic drinks to mealtimes and make water the go-to the rest of the day.
- Avoid eating after the final brush of the night.
- Give braces and aligners the extra cleaning time they need.
- Keep check-ups regular, even when nothing hurts.

None of this requires perfection. Steady habits beat occasional bursts of effort, and small changes to timing and drinks often move the needle more than nagging about brushing ever will.

Frequently asked questions

Why does my teen get cavities when they brush every day?

Brushing alone leaves the tight spaces between teeth untouched, which is where many cavities begin. Frequent sugary or acidic drinks and snacks, late-night eating, and skipped flossing often matter more than whether a brush touches the teeth twice a day.

Are sports drinks really that bad for teeth?

Many are both sugary and acidic, and the way they are often sipped slowly over a long workout or afternoon keeps teeth under prolonged acid exposure. Water is a better everyday choice; if sports drinks are used, keeping them to a short window and rinsing with water afterward helps.

Do braces cause cavities?

Braces do not cause cavities on their own, but they make thorough cleaning harder by trapping food and plaque around brackets and wires. With careful cleaning and the right tools, teens in braces can keep their teeth healthy; the risk comes from the extra effort being skipped.

Sources & further reading

- [Canadian Dental Association — Dental Care for Children and Teens](#) — brushing, diet, and prevention guidance
- [Government of Canada — Oral health](#) — everyday oral care resources

Published by Joy of Dentistry (jodmagazine.com). Educational content only; it is not a substitute for a professional dental examination and individual advice.