

Sipping soda pop all day can damage teeth

The auto mechanic loved his Mountain Dew.

While working on cars, the 25-year-old always had an open bottle at his side, said his dentist, Dr. Gary Hildebrandt.

The young man would take a sip, put it down and go back to work.

"He would do that all day long," Hildebrandt said. "He would only go through two 20-ounce bottles a day, which wasn't a lot, but we had to make him dentures. He totally destroyed his teeth."

Dentists like Hildebrandt are sounding the alarm about the damage done to teeth by sugary drinks. Much of the harm is caused by the habit of sipping soda pop all day, said Hildebrandt, director of the Division of Operative Dentistry at the University of Minnesota School of Dentistry.

Sugar in soft drinks combines with bacteria in the mouth to create acid that attacks the teeth. Acid in pop also weakens tooth enamel.

Besides tooth decay, sugar drinks have been linked to weight gain, obesity and diabetes. About 35 percent of U.S. adults are obese, while 17 per-

cent of children aged 2-19 are obese.

Last year, Americans spent \$71 billion on carbonated soft drinks and energy drinks, according to Beverage-Digest, an industry newsletter. Soft drinks are the biggest sellers, but energy drinks and bottled water are a growing segment of the market.

Soda pop has become a staple of the American diet. About one-half of Americans drink sugar drinks every day, according to the National Center for Health Statistics.

Young people are the biggest consumers. Seventy percent of boys aged 2-19 drink sugar drinks on any given day, compared to 60 percent of girls in that age group.

Soda pop is so damaging because it's easy to carry around and sip all day, Hildebrandt said.

When people eat or drink at regularly spaced meals during the day, teeth are protected by the natural flow of saliva in the mouth, he said. Saliva contains calcium, which replenishes calcium in the teeth and repairs damage.

"If you add to that many episodes of sweets during the

day, then the body can't keep up and you slowly, gradually lose mineral from the tooth. Gradually a hole forms and that would be a cavity," he said.

Hildebrandt advises patients to switch to sugar-free pop. Carbonic acid in diet pop doesn't cause cavities, although it can erode teeth, removing protective minerals from the tooth surface, he said. Carbonic acid provides the characteristic soda "fizz."

"We don't see erosion as big a problem as cavities," he said. "We make dentures because people get aggressive decay, not because they have erosion." Erosion can make teeth sensitive.

Tooth decay can occur in children as young as infants, said Dr. Kevan Cahow, dentist at Midwest Dental in Eagan.

"At that young age, most damage comes from parents giving them sugar water to help them sleep or pacify them," he said.

Water is the safest beverage choice for children and adults, he said. Bottled-water has become a popular choice, but it typically isn't fluoridated. Fluoride is added to most city water sup-

plies to prevent tooth decay.

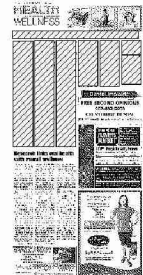
Cahow isn't concerned about lack of fluoridation because it has the biggest impact before age 8, when permanent tooth crowns are forming. "After age 8, the crowns have already formed and calcified, so internal intake of fluoride won't have much effect," he said.

The basics of brushing and flossing are keys to good oral health, said Dr. Patricia Braga, dentist at Cahill Dental Center when in fact we find, day after day in the clinic here, is that people leave a lot of bacteria behind," she said.

She recommends an electric toothbrush with a round head that oscillates, reaching under the gumline and between teeth. Instead of dental floss, she recommends a flossing tool with a long handle like a toothbrush and disposable flossing tip.

If a cavity develops, Braga creates fillings from porcelain tients' exposure to mercury, she said.

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration considers amalgam fillings safe for adults and children ages 6



and above.

High levels of mercury exposure are associated with adverse effects in the brain and kidneys, according to the FDA. The low exposure levels associated with amalgam fillings are well below levels associated with adverse health effects, the agency says.

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