

Fruit snacking is a rotten idea for your teeth, warn dentists

Oliver Moody Science Correspondent

Snacking on fruit between meals is fast emerging as one of the biggest sources of tooth problems and should be avoided, dentists have warned.

Many health-conscious people are also unwittingly exposing their teeth to near-continual erosion, with foods and drinks that contain more acid than Coca-Cola. Juice and smoothie diets pose a particular risk, the experts said.

Britain has the worst rates of tooth erosion in western Europe, according to a recent study, with 54 per cent of young adults showing signs of heavy wear. This is almost twice the average across the rest of the continent and has been described by dental academics as a "major public health issue".

Whereas tooth decay is often characterised as a disease linked to poverty and poor diet, academics have discovered that advanced enamel erosion is more common among the well-off, and particularly among wealthy men. David Bartlett, professor of prosthodontics at King's College London, said there were indications that this was

Risk factors of drinks

Low risk of enamel erosion

Sparkling water (titratable acidity: 0.1)
Lager (0.6)

Moderate Cola (0.7)
White wine (2.2)

High Apple juice (4.5)
Grapefruit (9.3)

Source: Clinical Science and Molecular Medicine

at least in part down to British people eating more fruit than other Europeans. "[The British] did seem to have a higher fruit intake when we looked at the data," he said. "I'm not sure why."

Professor Bartlett said that while it was extremely important for people to eat enough fruit, they should try to confine it to mealtimes.

Speaking at the British Dental Conference in Manchester this week, he warned that habitual grazing on highly acidic fruit such as oranges, kiwis and grapes throughout the day exposed

tooth enamel to constant wear and gave it little time to recover.

"It's not what you eat," he said. "It's how you eat it. It's all about habits and frequency. People snack on fruit all day because they're told that fruit's good for you, but what you've got to do is modify the intake and keep it to meal times."

Fruit juices such as grapefruit and apple are among the worst drinks for wear and erosion because of their high titratable acidity, Professor Bartlett said. By this measure, white wine is also significantly more acidic than some sugar-sweetened drinks, such as colas and fizzy orange juice.

Andrew Eder, professor of restorative dentistry and associate vice-provost at University College London, said that growing demand for some items that were promoted as "healthy" also risked worsening tooth decay.

Professor Eder said that people should have a maximum of two snacks a day in order to protect their teeth from wear and decay, while Professor Bartlett recommended using a fluoride rinse at lunchtime as well as brushing with fluoridated toothpaste twice a day.