

dental erosion a SILENT epidemic



Dental erosion is the loss of tooth structure due to exposure to acids. This occurs when teeth are exposed to acids such as those found in some beverages, in vomit and through some illegal drugs.

These acids can gradually erode enamel from teeth and lead to the loss of the tooth's natural shape, or premature exposure of the dentine, which is the internal part of a tooth. Tooth erosion can result in tooth sensitivity – especially when the tooth is exposed to hot and cold temperatures.

Acidic drinks like fruit juices, sports, soft and caffeinated drinks can exacerbate the dental erosion process. Other causes of dental erosion can be vomiting, excessive consumption of alcohol and the use of some illegal drugs.

Acidic Drinks: Most people are aware that high sugar soft drinks contribute to tooth decay. What is not so well known is that these drinks, along with fruit juices and caffeinated beverages often have high-acid levels, and can play a major role in the development of tooth erosion.

If a beverage has a low pH level, this means it is acidic and the lower the pH the more acidic the product. Damage can start to occur when the pH drops below 5.5. Soft and sports drinks, caffeinated beverages and fruit juices can have a low pH level, making them highly acidic.

The ADA recommends limiting consumption of acidic drinks and suggests the following guidelines if consuming such drinks:

- Avoid holding or 'swishing' high acid drinks around the mouth as this increases the likelihood of dental decay and enamel erosion.
- Use a straw where possible as this minimises exposure of the beverage to teeth.
- If you do drink soft and sports drinks, try to consume them chilled, as cooler temperatures have been shown to be less likely to encourage tooth erosion.
- Drink fluoridated tap water as much as possible.
- Chewing sugar free gum can stimulate saliva flow and wash these acids away.

Other causes of teeth erosion: Binge drinking and eating disorders that induce vomiting can also contribute to dental erosion. Stomach acids from vomiting, eating disorders or the result of binge drinking can cause damage to tooth enamel and exposed root surfaces.

People who take 'recreational' drugs like amphetamines and cocaine have an increased likelihood of tooth damage because of the acidic nature of these drugs. Illicit drugs can lead to a dry mouth, which leave teeth vulnerable to attack by acids.

If a person is suffering from reoccurring vomiting, exposing their teeth to stomach acids, or is using illegal drugs, the ADA recommends the following:

- Rinse the mouth thoroughly with water.
- Rub fluoridated toothpaste on teeth with a finger to toughen the teeth and freshen the mouth.
- DO NOT brush the teeth until they can recover – at least 30 minutes after vomiting and with a soft bristled brush and fluoridated toothpaste.
- Maintain good oral hygiene and make regular visits to the dentist.
- Seek advice from a specialist who can provide support and advice for eating disorders or drug abuse.

