

Healthy Teeth, Healthy Athlete: 3 Things Parents Should Know About Oral Health

If you're the caregiver for a young athlete, you need to be paying close attention to their oral health and hygiene, especially since good practices for sports nutrition don't always align with the best practices for dental health. This Children's Dental Health Month, Dr. Michele LaBetz, a [TrueSport Expert](#) and sports medicine specialist, is sharing three things every parent should know about oral health for their young athletes.

1. Sports nutrition isn't always ideal for dental health

"The tricky thing is that [what we recommend athletes do for performance](#) sometimes can be detrimental to their teeth," says LaBetz. "For example, most sports drinks are incredibly bad for the teeth. They are almost as acidic as vinegar and lemon juice, so they are enamel softeners. But [if you're training for more than 60 minutes](#), you do need those simple carbohydrates, and for many athletes, [sports drinks are the easiest way to consume both water and those necessary sugars](#)."

Added to that, most sports lead to more breathing through your mouth as your exertion level rises, and that can cause the sugar in sports drinks to essentially dry on the teeth. When your mouth is closed, LaBetz explains that saliva can help mitigate some of the effects of the sugar in sports drinks. But if an athlete is doing a long run, they're likely breathing through their mouth the whole time, compounding the problem of the sports drink on their teeth.

Finally, because of the high energy demands for many athletes, [they do need to be eating more carbohydrates in general throughout the day](#). That means over the course of the day, they're regularly ingesting sugars that are beneficial to the body's energy systems, but potentially detrimental to their tooth enamel. "When you have constant carbohydrate inflow into your mouth, that's a lot of sugar on your teeth all the time," says LaBetz. "That's especially true if they're using sports gummies or other sticky sports nutrition options, which can stick and impact enamel even more than a sports drink."

To combat this enamel softening, LaBetz recommends using straws with sports drinks and rinsing the mouth with plain water regularly during practice. After practice, your athlete should rinse their mouth thoroughly with water or an enamel strengthening mouthwash and/or chew sugar-free gum to get the saliva flowing. To minimize damage to the softened enamel, athletes should wait 30-60 minutes after their last sports drink before brushing their teeth. It's a good idea to focus on water and milk and avoid sports drinks for hydration during the rest of the day. In addition to calcium and vitamin D to help build strong teeth, milk protects enamel by helping to neutralize acidic food and beverages and actually forms a protective coating on the teeth!

2. Dial in the daily oral hygiene habits

In general, the first step to improving oral health is to ensure that daily oral hygiene habits are established. "Everyone should be brushing twice a day with a soft-bristle toothbrush for two minutes each time, using a toothpaste that contains fluoride," LaBetz says.

Flossing is another key component. LaBotz recommends using standard dental floss rather than single use plastic picks, since the regular floss allows people to better reach different angles between their teeth and gums. If your athlete has braces, a water flosser may be a better choice for helping them remove any debris.

For athletes in particular, an enamel-strengthening mouthwash can also be a good extra step in their routine, helping to mitigate some of the impacts of sugary sports drinks. And for young athletes who contend with bad breath, a tongue scraper can be a helpful addition to their routine, says LaBotz.

Finally, regular trips to the dentist for deep cleaning, fluoride treatments, and checkups can help avoid bigger problems in the future.

3. Stay on top of sport-related prevention and treatment

For contact or collision sports, such as basketball, wrestling, and football, LaBotz notes that [current recommendations from the American Dental Association](#) include consistent mouthguard use. "Basketball is the sport with the highest risk of dental injury," she says. "Yet a lot of athletes skip wearing a mouthguard. But participation in these sports should mean wearing a mouthguard."

"Teeth shouldn't hurt," LaBotz adds. "Toothaches are miserable. If your athlete is having enough discomfort that they're mentioning it to you, or if they notice that their gums are starting to bleed more than usual, or if they have any damage like a loose or chipped tooth, you should call a dentist."

She also notes that if your athlete does lose a tooth while playing, the best thing you can do is put it back into the socket if possible. Putting it in either milk or saltwater saline is the second-best solution, and in either case, getting to a dentist as quickly as possible is key.

Takeaway

For young athletes, oral hygiene is extremely important because what's good for sports nutrition isn't necessarily good for long-term dental health. Sugary drinks that support training and competition can soften tooth enamel, so ensuring your athlete is brushing regularly, flossing, and either rinsing with water, drinking milk, or brushing their teeth after consuming sugary sports drinks and snacks is going to help keep their teeth healthy in the long term.



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