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THE SOUR TRUTH

How Acidic and Sugary Drinks Harm Your Child's Oral Health

Dr Monica Farrelly ADA Oral Health Promoter

Millions of Australian kids knock back sugary and acidic drinks like fruit juices, sports drinks and soft drinks on a daily basis. While these beverages may quench young thirsts and appear harmless or even beneficial especially when advertised as natural or 'healthy alternatives', in fact they pose significant risks to children's oral health.

As a reminder this Dental Health Week 2025 (August 4 to 10), the Australian Dental Association (ADA) is encouraging parents to pay close attention to their children's diets in addition to regular dental check-ups, and ensuring teeth are brushed twice a day and flossed daily.

Drinks high in sugar and acidic in nature create a perfect storm for tooth decay, weight gain and long-term metabolic issues. Children's developing teeth are particularly vulnerable to decay with excessive consumption of these drinks. In fact, one in three kids aged 5-6 have decay in primary teeth and one in four kids aged 6-14 have experienced it in their permanent teeth. (1) Understanding the risks is the first step toward making better choices for children's health.

ADA surveys have also found that 48% of Australian adults consume too much sugar every day (1) when the World Health Organization recommends a maximum of 24g or 6 teaspoons a day.

It's also essential to pay attention to drinks containing "natural sugars," like fruit juice. Around 27% (2) of children consume fruit juice daily and 38% between 2 and 5 times a week, despite the vast majority - 87% - of parents saying they're aware these drinks lead to tooth decay, presenting a disconnect between knowledge and action.

Parents are a bit in the dark when it comes to the sugar levels in most fruit juices, the ADA study found, and the federal government has a responsibility to make sure manufacturers provide easier to understand labels so parents can make informed choices without needing a degree in nutrition!

Dr Monica Farrelly, the ADA's Oral Health Promoter and Sydney dentist explains: "Even though fruit juice may come from natural sources, it still contains sugars in the form of fructose, which can feed harmful bacteria in your mouth, producing acids that attack teeth enamel, leading to cavities and erosion."

In addition to fruit juice, many sports and energy drinks, flavored waters, and so-called 'healthy' drinks, while lower in sugar, contain high levels of acidity. These drinks can cause significant tooth erosion. Even sugar-free drinks can be damaging, as the added food acids they contain contribute to enamel erosion.

The lower the pH, the higher the acidity. For context, water has a neutral pH of 7, whereas other drinks are much more acidic. A study published in the *Journal of the American Dental Association* found that



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soft drinks have a pH between 2.3 and 3, energy drinks range from 2.6 to 3.6, sports drinks range from 2.7 to 3.1 and flavoured waters have a pH between 3 and 3.8. (3)

For comparison, vinegar has a pH between 2.4 and 3.4 and the contents of the human stomach have a pH of around 2 while fresh milk has a pH of 6.7, making it far less acidic. So the lower the number, the higher the acidity and the more it contributes to tooth decay.

The best drinks for children are always water and plain milk. The ADA recommends offering children a piece of fruit and a glass of water instead of fruit juice, as a healthier and more tooth-friendly option.

Sources and visuals:

1. <https://ada.org.au/about/dental-profession/australias-oral-health-trackers>
2. The ADA Consumer Survey 2024, which cannot be shared in its entirety, though excerpts may be shared with ADA permission.
3. The ADA has advocated to Food Standards Australia New Zealand to make the Health Star Ratings system on many food and drinks mandatory, and be tougher on foods with hidden sugars. See the ADA's submission [here](#).
4. Also below is one of three posters you can use to illustrate the story, find links to them all [here](#).



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Acidity (pH) of drinks

How do they stack up?

Choosing sugar free drinks does not protect you from tooth acid erosion.

Read the nutrition label. Look out for food acids (196, 330, 331, 338)



Soft drink
pH 2.3 - 3



Energy drink
pH 2.6 - 3.6



Sport drink
pH 2.7 - 3.1



Flavoured water
pH 3.0 - 3.8



Wine
pH 3.0 - 3.9



Orange juice
pH 3.6



Milk
pH 6.7



Water
pH 7.0

The lower the pH, the stronger the acid

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