

Australians' love affair with sugary drinks rots the smiles of children as young as five

Leading health bodies call for people to rethink sugary drink this World Oral Health Day.

With new figures revealing almost half of Australian children aged 5-10 experience tooth decay in their baby teeth [1], the Rethink Sugary Drink alliance is urging Aussies to give their teeth a break from sugary drinks and make the switch to water in a bid to protect their oral health.

The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare figures released today also reveal this trend continues into adulthood with Australians aged 15 and over having an average of nearly 13 decayed, missing or filled teeth.

Sugary drinks, such as soft drinks, sports drinks and energy drinks, are a major contributor of added sugar in Australian children's diets and the leading cause of tooth decay.

On World Oral Health Day today, Craig Sinclair, Head of Prevention at Cancer Council Victoria, a partner of Rethink Sugary Drink, is urging Australians to see this information as motivation to cut back on sugary drinks.

While regular sugary drink consumption leaves a lasting effect on Australians' oral health, Mr Sinclair said the risks extend beyond just teeth.

"These super sugary drinks don't stop at ruining Aussie smiles. In the long run they can lead to unhealthy weight gain, increasing the risk of serious health problems such as type 2 diabetes, heart and kidney disease, stroke and 13 types of cancer."

"It's sadly no surprise that tooth decay is hitting Australian kids hard, given the overwhelming availability of sugary drinks. Not only are there significantly more sugary drink choices available today, they are everywhere our kids look. Ironically they're even in venues designed to help our kids be healthy, such as sports centres, sporting clubs, as well as places they visit regularly like train stations, festivals and events," Mr Sinclair said.

"Big beverage brands don't just stop there – they also sweet talk our kids into guzzling high-sugar drinks through social media, and outdoor and online advertising. We need government to invest in public education campaigns to cut through the marketing spin and expose the health impacts of sugary drinks."

A/Prof Matthew Hopcraft, Chief Executive Officer of the Australian Dental Association Victorian Branch, a Rethink Sugary Drink partner, has seen the devastating impact sugary drinks has on children's teeth and wants Australians to consider the consequences of drinking too many.

"I've seen firsthand the devastating impact tooth decay has on the health, nutrition, social and emotional wellbeing of these kids and their families. There are extreme cases where dentists are extracting all 20 baby teeth from kids as young as 3 – it's not pretty." A/Prof Hopcraft said.

"Some people may not realise every time they take a sip from a sugary drink they expose their teeth to an acid attack, dissolving the outer surface of our tooth enamel. This regular loss of enamel can lead to cavities and exposure of the inner layers of the tooth that may leave them feeling very sensitive and painful.

"Healthy teeth are an integral part of good oral health, enabling us to eat, speak and socialise without pain, discomfort or embarrassment. It's disheartening to know 27% of Aussie kids feel uncomfortable about the appearance of their teeth. No kid should look back on their childhood and remember the distress and pain that came as a result of drinking too many sugary drinks."

A/Prof Hopcraft said World Oral Health Day serves the perfect chance for Australians to rethink their choice of drink.

"We know less than 10 per cent of Australian adults have managed to avoid tooth decay. There is no reason why we can't turn these numbers around. If Australians can simply cut back on sugary drinks or remove them entirely from their diet, their teeth will be much stronger and healthier for it," A/Prof Hopcraft said

"We recommend taking a look at how much sugar is in these drinks - people may be shocked to know some have as many as 16 teaspoons of sugar. Water is always the best choice and your teeth will thank you in the long run."

In support of World Oral Health Day the Rethink Sugary Drink alliance are calling for the following actions in addition to the restriction of unhealthy drink marketing to address the issue of sugary drink overconsumption:

A public education campaign supported by Australian governments to highlight the health impacts of regular sugary

[1] AIHW (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare) 2019. Oral health and dental care in Australia, 2014-15 and 2016-17