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Protecting our Children's Dental Health
By Dr. Michael J. Connolly

April is National Oral Health Month and that provides an excellent and timely opportunity to join the conversation on increasing public awareness of the harmful effects of sugary drinks and how to reduce their consumption.

As a dentist I see the effects directly and indirectly of sugary drink consumption in all segments of our population. The consumption of sugary drinks is associated with many chronic diseases, not the least of which is dental decay.


Over the past five to ten years, dentists have seen a rise in early childhood caries (cavities). Seeing this phenomenon creeping back into our practices is cause for concern; looking back roughly thirty years, we saw rampant tooth decay in children, but thanks to enhanced public education and the introduction of a provincial dental program for children, this kind of tooth decay became almost non-existent in PEI.

Sugary drink consumption in infants and children is as close as the bottle that feeds them. Babies' feeding bottles may contain juice or surprisingly, even pop. Their teeth begin to erupt and develop at about six months of age and when these sugary liquids are in contact with their teeth for extended periods, cavities can develop: bacteria use sugar as food, acid is the resulting product, and acid causes decay. Even milk and formula left in contact with their teeth for too long can cause cavities. And unfortunately, childhood tooth decay sometimes continues into a similar disease pattern with their permanent teeth.

Several of the leading culprits in this rise of dental decay in our children include feeding at night over extended periods of time, sleeping with bottles, and repetitive use of non-spill sippy cups. One way for a parent to mitigate the damage is to clean their baby's teeth with a facecloth or gauze cloth a couple of times a day after feeding.

For the purposes of this forum, I've attached the main headline to children, but the effects of sugary drinks on dental health go far beyond childhood. Keeping our children cavity-free can have lifelong benefits, as those with caries at an early age are more likely to experience future dental problems.

The answer to this challenge, in my view, is education. It worked before and it can work again. The Dental Association of PEI, earlier this month introduced the "First Free Visit" dental program



for children up to age three. This program will afford dentists in participating dental offices an early opportunity to detect any tooth decay at an early stage and provide parents with important information about prevention.

But increased taxes on sugary drinks, public policy to reduce portion sizes and working with beverage producers to decrease added sugar content must also be part of the equation to help parents make wise healthy choices for their children. Let's start a discussion and create some momentum – we owe it to our children and to the adults they will become.

Anyone interested in taking advantage of PEI's "Free First Visit" program should contact their dentist or go to www.dapei.ca