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Halloween Candy Warning (No, It's Not About Sugar)

Some Halloween treats are scarier for teeth than others. Here's how to spot the worst offenders, avoid candy battles and keep Halloween fun.

It's Halloween night. Your little goblins have spent hours walking the neighborhood, collecting a treasure trove of candy. They're tired, sweaty, overstimulated and running on pure excitement. Now they're sitting on the living room floor, proudly sorting through their hard-earned loot.

The last thing they want to hear? A lecture about sugar.

But before they tear into those sour gummies and sticky caramels, there's something you should know: Some of the worst Halloween candies aren't necessarily the ones with the most sugar. How sticky or acidic they are—and how often your child snacks on them—can make a big difference in their risk for cavities.

The Triple Threat: Sour, Sweet and Sticky
If Halloween candy had a most-wanted list, sour gummies would be near the top. These colorful, mouth-puckering treats combine three characteristics that make them especially troublesome for teeth.

They're sour. Many sour candies contain acids, such as citric acid, that can directly weaken tooth enamel. Unlike the acids produced by bacteria after eating sugar, these acids are already present in the candy.

They're sweet. Bacteria in your mouth feed on sugar and produce acids that attack tooth enamel. Repeated acid attacks can eventually lead to cavities.

They're sticky. Gummy candies, taffy, caramels and other chewy treats can cling to teeth long after the candy is gone. They can work their way into the tiny pits and grooves of back teeth, where cavities commonly develop, and lodge between teeth, where toothbrush bristles have trouble reaching.

That's why thorough brushing and flossing before bedtime are especially important after a night of Halloween treats. Even if your exhausted little ghost wants to crawl straight into bed, removing leftover candy and plaque is a must. If they've just eaten highly acidic sour candy, have them rinse with water and allow time before brushing.

Sticky Candy Can Cause Trouble for Dental Work, Too
Some chewy candies, including taffy and caramels, can pull on dental restorations. If your child has dental sealants—the thin protective coatings applied to the chewing surfaces of back teeth—especially sticky treats are worth approaching with caution. Sealants that have become loose may be dislodged and need to be repaired or replaced.

Hard candies, including Jolly Ranchers and

jawbreakers, present another problem. Biting down on them can chip or crack teeth and damage fillings or other dental work. Sucking on them for long periods also keeps sugar in contact with teeth.

What about chocolate? Plain chocolate is generally a better choice because it melts and clears from teeth more easily than sticky candy. It's still sugary, of course, but it doesn't linger in the same way as a gummy worm or caramel.

The Halloween Habit That Can Be Worse Than the Candy Itself

Here's something many parents don't realize: When it comes to cavities, how often children eat candy can be just as important as what they're eating.

Every time your child eats something containing sugar or certain starches, bacteria in their mouth can produce acids that weaken tooth enamel. Fortunately, saliva helps neutralize those acids, wash away food particles and replace minerals lost from enamel.

But saliva needs time to do its job.

Think about a typical family dinner. Everyone sits down, eats their meal and eventually leaves the table. Eating stimulates saliva production, and once the meal is over, saliva can continue working to neutralize acids and help teeth recover.

Now imagine your child spending the afternoon grabbing a handful of Halloween candy, then some crackers, then another piece of candy, followed by a few chips. Each new snack containing fermentable carbohydrates can trigger another round of acid production. Even though their mouth continues making saliva, those repeated exposures give teeth less uninterrupted time to recover.

This is why **grazing on candy and starchy snacks throughout the day can be especially harmful to teeth.**

A better approach? Let children enjoy a few favorite treats with or shortly after a meal, then put the candy away until another planned treat time. Between meals, offer water and tooth-friendly snacks such as cheese or crunchy vegetables.

The goal isn't to eliminate every sweet treat. It's to give teeth a break between them.

Now comes the tricky part. How do you convince a child who just walked two miles collecting candy that some of their hard-earned treats aren't worth keeping?

Sweeten the Deal With a Candy Trade-In

If your little goblins aren't quite ready to part with their stickiest, sourest treasures, try offering something in exchange.

Pay them for their candy. Offer 25 cents for each piece they voluntarily surrender. They might discover that saving up for a toy is more exciting than another handful of gummies.

Trade candy for experiences. Offer a family movie night, a special outing or another activity they enjoy in exchange for a portion of their candy.

Visit a Halloween Candy Buyback. Some dental offices and community organizations offer cash, prizes or other rewards for unwanted Halloween candy. Participating programs may send collected candy in care packages to deployed military service members. Visit HalloweenCandyBuyback.com to learn more about participating locations and donations.

Whatever approach you choose, keep it positive. The goal isn't to make children feel guilty about enjoying candy. It's to help them develop healthy habits and understand why their choices matter.

Be the House That Hands Out Better Treats

Parents aren't the only ones who can make Halloween healthier. Think about the treats you're handing out to trick-or-treaters in your own neighborhood.

If sticky, sour candies are the treats you'd rather your children avoid, why send other kids home with them?

Fortunately, you don't have to give up the fun of handing out Halloween goodies. There are plenty of treats and surprises kids will be excited to find in their bags.

Better candy choices include:

- Miniature plain chocolate bars without sticky fillings
- Sugar-free gum for children old enough to chew it safely
- Sugar-free lollipops

Fun alternatives to candy include:

- Colorful, individually packaged toothbrushes
- Small bottles of water
- Glow sticks or glow bracelets
- Halloween stickers or temporary tattoos
- Spider rings or other small novelty toys
- Mini coloring books and crayons
- Fun pencils, erasers or bookmarks
- Bubbles

Here's a fun idea: Pair a colorful toothbrush with a miniature chocolate bar, a pack of sugar-free gum or a sugar-free lollipop. Kids still get something sweet, along with a useful reminder to take care of their smiles. (You'll be surprised by how happy some kids are to get a new toothbrush.)

Remember to choose age-appropriate items and avoid small toys or hard candies that could pose choking hazards for younger children. If offering food, consider potential allergies.

Whether you're handing out treats or helping your own children sort through their Halloween haul, small choices can make a big difference in keeping their smiles healthy.

A Few Simple Habits Can Keep Halloween Smiles Healthy

Halloween should be about costumes, neighborhood adventures and happy memories, not worrying about every piece of candy your child eats.

A few simple habits can help protect their teeth:

- Enjoy candy with meals rather than snacking on it throughout the day.
- Drink water after eating sweets to help rinse away food particles and acids.
- Brush twice daily with fluoride toothpaste and floss once a day, especially before bedtime.
- After eating highly acidic sour candy, rinse with water and wait about an hour before brushing to avoid damaging acid-softened enamel.
- Keep up with regular dental visits so potential problems can be caught early.

And remember, a little Halloween candy doesn't have to be frightening. The goal is moderation, good oral hygiene and helping children learn to make choices that protect their smiles long after the costumes are put away.

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