Can You Reverse Tooth Decay? | Core Dental

Canonical: https://www.coredental.com.au/can-reverse-tooth-decay/

Details:

Tooth decay can sometimes be stopped or reversed, but only when it is caught early, before it reaches the dentine, the layer beneath the enamel. Early decay shows as white spot lesions, and your saliva, fluoride, less frequent sugar and starch, good brushing and regular check-ups can help the enamel repair itself. Once decay has passed into the dentine it cannot be reversed and usually needs a filling. At Core Dental our team can check your teeth and advise you.

How does tooth decay develop?

Tooth decay comes from repeated acid attacks in the mouth. When you eat or drink sugars or starches, such as soft drinks, energy drinks or white bread, bacteria in your mouth use them to produce acids. The acids weaken tooth enamel and, over time, break down the tooth structure.

Early decay appears as white spot lesions. If the acid attacks continue, decay can advance into the dentine and cause permanent damage that needs a filling.

How can early tooth decay be stopped or reversed?

Several habits support the natural repair of early decay.

What role does saliva play?

Saliva repairs enamel by returning minerals to your teeth. It also neutralises acid in your mouth and washes away food debris and bacteria that cause cavities. Drinking water throughout the day helps saliva production. If your mouth feels dry, chewing sugar-free gum can help stimulate it.

Why does limiting sugars and starches matter?

Every time you eat or drink sugars or starches, your teeth are under acid attack. It takes around 30 minutes for the acid level in your saliva to settle and for minerals to begin returning to your teeth. Eating fewer sugary and starchy foods and drinks, and choosing nutritious foods, lowers the risk of decay. See our guide to healthy snacks that help prevent tooth decay and the effects of acidic drinks on tooth enamel .

How do regular check-ups and cleans help?

Visiting your dentist or hygienist about every six months helps find early signs of decay or gum disease. To stop a problem progressing, your clinician might apply fluoride gel to your teeth and show you how to brush and floss so that plaque and bacteria are fully removed.

How should you look after your teeth at home?

Brush twice daily with fluoride toothpaste and clean between your teeth once daily. Your hygienist can give you tips to suit your mouth.

What is fluoride and where does it come from?

Fluoride is a mineral that can prevent decay or slow it in the early stages. It returns minerals to the enamel, strengthens teeth and reduces the ability of bacteria to make acid. Usual sources include:

toothpaste

tap water in Australia

fluoride tablets

products prescribed by your dentist

If your dentist feels you need extra fluoride, they may recommend a concentrated fluoride toothpaste, gel or mouth rinse. If you are unsure how much fluoride you should be using, ask at your next check-up. Read more in what fluoride is and what it is used for .

What if the decay has already reached the dentine?

When decay has passed through the enamel into the dentine, the tooth cannot repair itself. Your dentist will usually recommend a filling to restore the tooth and prevent the decay from spreading. If a tooth is sore, sensitive or has a visible hole, book a visit promptly so it can be assessed. See our information on general dentistry and dental check-ups .

How can we help?

Our dentists and hygienists at all nine Core Dental clinics can examine your teeth, apply fluoride where suitable and explain the right brushing and flossing techniques for you. We quote before treatment starts and offer interest-free payment plans. Call 13 13 16 or book online.

What can be repaired, and what cannot

"Can tooth decay be reversed" has two different answers depending on how far it has gone, and conflating them is how people end up either falsely reassured or needlessly alarmed.

The Victorian Department of Health describes what fluoride does in terms that draw the line exactly where it belongs. Decay, it says, "occurs when acid attacks the surface of the tooth. Fluoride helps repair any damage before it becomes serious." Among the benefits it lists: fluoride "repairs weak spots that could become cavities (holes in teeth) on the surface of the tooth".

Read that carefully. What is repairable is a weak spot that could become a cavity — damage at the surface, before a hole has formed. The Department's phrasing is about preventing a weak spot from progressing, not about filling in a hole that already exists.

So the useful framing is:

Early surface damage : the tooth can repair, and "a constant low-level supply of fluoride is best for this". This is the stage where brushing, diet and fluoride genuinely change the outcome.

An established cavity — a hole : the Department describes cavities as the thing weak spots "could become", i.e. the outcome fluoride is working to prevent. Nothing on the page suggests a hole repairs itself, and we are not going to imply that it does.

That distinction has a practical consequence: the stage at which this is still reversible is usually the stage at which you cannot feel anything. There is no symptom that says "weak spot". It is found by

looking, which is the honest argument for examinations rather than waiting for pain.

The Department also sets out why early loss matters more in children: fluoride "helps prevent early loss of baby teeth due to decay. Baby teeth are important because they help to guide the adult teeth developing underneath into the right place. Losing baby teeth early may result in the need for orthodontic treatment." A decayed baby tooth is not a disposable problem — it is a placeholder for the tooth behind it.

We can tell you which stage your own teeth are at. What we cannot do is tell you from a web page, and anyone who promises to reverse decay without looking at the tooth is selling something.

A note on the source: the Department of Health page quoted here states its own review date as 30 April 2012. The mechanism it describes is unchanged, which is why we quote it.

Source: Better Health Channel (Victorian Department of Health), Dental care — fluoride, betterhealth.vic.gov.au (page reviewed 30 April 2012; accessed 4 November 2026).

The four things the published advice asks of you

Beyond fluoride, the Department's list of what protects teeth is short, unglamorous and complete: "eating a healthy diet", "brushing and flossing your teeth regularly", "having regular dental check-ups", and "using a toothpaste with fluoride in it."

Four items. No products beyond toothpaste, no supplements, no routines of the kind the internet supplies. It is worth saying plainly that this is the whole published list, because the absence of anything more elaborate is itself information.

Two of the four are worth drawing out.

"Even if your water is fluoridated". That is the Department's own framing for this list — fluoridated water does not substitute for brushing. A constant low-level supply helps the tooth repair; it does not remove the acid attacks in the first place.

Regular check-ups are on the list for a mechanical reason , not as a platitude. Since the reversible stage of decay is the stage without symptoms, the only way it gets caught in time is by someone looking. If you are deciding what to prioritise, the examination is what converts the other three items from hope into a plan.

On what fluoride cannot do, the Department is also useful by omission. Its benefits list runs to protecting against decay in children and adults, repairing weak spots, preventing early loss of baby teeth, protecting against "surface decay in older adults", and helping prevent "painful and costly dental complications like tooth abscess or other permanent tooth damage". Nowhere does it claim fluoride undoes an established cavity or treats an abscess — it prevents the complications, which is a different claim.

If you have pain, swelling, or a tooth that has broken down, that is past the stage this page is about. Call us on 13 13 16 and we will arrange an examination.

Source: Better Health Channel (Victorian Department of Health), Dental care — fluoride, betterhealth.vic.gov.au (page reviewed 30 April 2012; accessed 4 November 2026).

Frequently asked questions

Can a cavity heal by itself?

Very early decay, seen as a white spot on the enamel, can sometimes be reversed with saliva, fluoride and good habits. Once decay reaches the dentine it cannot heal itself and usually needs a filling.

What is a white spot lesion?

A white spot lesion is an early sign of enamel losing minerals. It looks like a chalky white patch on the tooth. Caught early, it may be stopped with fluoride and good home care.

Does fluoride really help teeth?

Fluoride helps return minerals to enamel and makes it harder for bacteria to produce acid. It is available in toothpaste, tap water and professional products. Your dentist can advise what suits you.

How long does saliva take to neutralise acid after eating?

It takes around 30 minutes for acid levels to settle and for minerals to begin returning to your teeth. Frequent snacking on sugary or starchy food keeps teeth under repeated acid attack.

How often should I see a dentist to catch decay early?

Many people visit about every six months, but your dentist will recommend a schedule based on your needs and risk of decay.

What stage of decay can actually repair?

Early surface damage. The Victorian Department of Health describes fluoride as repairing "weak spots that could become cavities (holes in teeth) on the surface of the tooth", and helping "repair any damage before it becomes serious". A weak spot can improve; a hole is the outcome that work is trying to prevent.

Can a cavity heal on its own?

Nothing in the published advice suggests it does. The Department treats cavities as what weak spots "could become" — the thing fluoride is preventing, not something it undoes. Anyone offering to reverse an established hole without examining the tooth is overstating what is possible.

Why would I not know I had reversible decay?

Because the reversible stage usually has no symptoms. There is no sensation that corresponds to a weak spot in enamel, which is why it is found by examination rather than by waiting for pain — and why regular check-ups are on the Department's short list of what protects teeth.

What does the published advice ask of me day to day?

Four things, and that is the whole list: "eating a healthy diet", "brushing and flossing your teeth regularly", "having regular dental check-ups", and "using a toothpaste with fluoride in it". The Department prefaces it with "even if your water is fluoridated" — fluoridated water does not replace brushing.

Does decay in a baby tooth matter if it will fall out anyway?

Yes. The Department notes that fluoride "helps prevent early loss of baby teeth due to decay", and explains why that matters: "baby teeth are important because they help to guide the adult teeth

developing underneath into the right place. Losing baby teeth early may result in the need for orthodontic treatment."

Related services and further reading

Healthy snacks to help prevent tooth decay in children

Acid attack: the effects of acidic drinks on tooth enamel

What is fluoride and what is it used for?

Use fluoride toothpaste

Dental check-ups

Dental hygiene

General dentistry

5 tips for a healthier smile

Core Dental at a glance

Nine Core Dental clinics across Melbourne: Southbank, South Melbourne, Caroline Springs, Carrum Downs, Epping, Wyndham, Berwick, Bayside and Glenferrie.

Open six days a week: Monday to Friday 8.00am to 6.00pm and Saturday mornings.

We quote before treatment starts and offer interest-free payment plans, with HICAPS on-site claiming at our clinics.

Call 13 13 16 or book online.

Contact Core Dental

Phone	13 13 16
Booking	Online through coredental.com.au, or call 13 13 16
Hours	Monday to Friday 8.00am to 6.00pm, Saturday 8.00am to 1.30pm (Bayside Saturday 8.30am to 1.30pm), Sunday closed
Clinics	Bayside , Berwick , Caroline Springs , Carrum Downs , Epping , Glenferrie , South Melbourne , Southbank , Wyndham

This article is general in nature and does not replace advice from a registered dental practitioner who has examined you. Results, recovery times and potential risks vary for each individual. Seek advice from a qualified, AHPRA-registered practitioner before proceeding.

Can tooth decay be reversed?

Tooth decay can sometimes be stopped or reversed if it is caught before it reaches the dentine. Core Dental dentists can check for early decay and advise on saliva, fluoride and diet.

What does early tooth decay look like?

Early decay appears as white spot lesions on the enamel. If acid attacks continue, it can progress into the dentine and may need a filling. A Core Dental dentist can assess any spots you notice.

How does saliva help repair teeth?

Saliva returns minerals to enamel, neutralises acid and washes away food debris and bacteria. Drinking water and chewing sugar-free gum can stimulate saliva, as our Core Dental hygienists advise.

How long are teeth under acid attack after sugar?

Each time you eat sugars or starches, it takes around 30 minutes for acid in the mouth to settle and minerals to start returning. Core Dental suggests limiting how often you snack.

What does fluoride do for teeth?

Fluoride returns minerals to enamel, strengthens teeth and reduces the ability of bacteria to make acid. Core Dental dentists may apply fluoride gel or recommend concentrated products if needed.

Where does fluoride come from?

Usual sources are fluoridated toothpaste, tap water in Australia, fluoride tablets and products prescribed by a dentist. Ask your Core Dental dentist how much suits you.

What happens if decay reaches the dentine?

Decay in the dentine cannot repair itself, and a Core Dental dentist will usually recommend a filling to restore the tooth and stop the decay spreading.

How do I book a check-up for early decay at Core Dental?

Call Core Dental on 13 13 16 or book online through coredental.com.au at any of our nine clinics. Tell us about any sensitivity, spots or sore teeth.