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Home remedies for constipation may cause dental caries

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Constipation and dental caries may sound like strange bedfellows, but there is a connection.

Seventeen to 40% of children experience constipation. Symptoms such as painful defecation, fecal incontinence and abdominal pain can contribute to significant distress for both the child and family. The desire for immediate relief may lead families to try home remedies, many of which are known to cause dental caries.

In one week, two pediatric patients presented to a dental clinic with a mouthful of cavities. Both children were healthy with the exception of a history of chronic constipation. Both children were following an elder relative's recommendation to drink a sugar syrup several times a day along with juice and were snacking frequently on dried fruit and fiber gummies.

The etiology of dental caries is multifactorial with frequent consumption of carbohydrates being a historically strong and consistent risk factor. Brushing twice a day and flossing once a day may not be sufficient to overcome the high amounts of sugar some children are consuming to treat chronic constipation.

Evidence-based guidelines for the evaluation and treatment of functional constipation were updated in 2013 by the North American Society for Pediatric Gastroenterology, Hepatology and Nutrition and the European Society for Pediatric Gastroenterology, Hepatology and Nutrition. The guidelines state that scientific evidence does not support the use of fiber supplements, probiotics, extra fluid intake, increased physical activity, behavioral therapy or biofeedback for the treatment of constipation in children.

The most effective and safest pharmacologic treatment is polyethylene glycol (PEG). If PEG is not available, then lactulose is recommended. Both PEG and lactulose are less cariogenic than alternative remedies.

Constipation is among many medical conditions that benefit from collaborative care between primary health care providers and the dental team.

The pediatric dentist can make the child's pediatrician aware of the chronic constipation problem and any home remedies being used. Encouraging the family to see the pediatrician for proper evaluation and management of constipation is as important as urging care for conditions like cow's milk allergy, celiac disease, hypothyroidism and hypercalcemia.

In addition, pediatricians can provide successful evidence-based "non-cariogenic" treatment regimens for constipation. If a cariogenic remedy has to be used, it would be prudent to ensure the child has a dental home and educate the family that frequently eating cariogenic foods may increase the risk of dental caries.

A common electronic health record (EHR) between physicians and dentists is one tool to facilitate care coordination and optimize health outcomes for children. Adding an alert in the EHR for patient education when a medical therapy might carry a risk for developing dental caries would be a value-added preventive benefit.

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