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Media release

The “healthy” school lunchbox items that are hiding sugar

Flavoured yoghurt, muesli bars, and breakfast cereal marketed to families as healthy are often loaded with hidden sugar, the New Zealand Dental Association (NZDA) is warning parents.

Nearly 42% of New Zealand five-year-olds have already had tooth decay, a figure that's barely moved in two decades.

Dr Mo Amso, NZDA Chief Executive, says sugar hides in places most parents wouldn't expect.

“It's not just lollies and fizzy drinks. Sugar shows up under names like sucrose, glucose and corn syrup on labels for foods that look like healthy choices,” he says.

“Teaching kids to spot it early is one of the simplest ways to protect their teeth for life.”

To close out National Oral Health Month, NZDA is taking that message into classrooms with a Sugar Detective programme, asking students to find hidden sugar in everyday food and drink.

NZDA–Colgate Oral Health Promotion Manager Anishma Ram says the easiest place for parents to start is the label.

“Check the ingredients list, not the front of the pack. If sugar is one of the first three ingredients or shows up more than once under a different name, it's a sugar-heavy food no matter how it's marketed.

“Swapping even one hidden-sugar item a week for something like plain yoghurt, fruit or water makes a real difference over time.”

Sugary drinks are the biggest source of added sugar in New Zealand kids' diets, and NZDA has spent years pushing for tougher rules around them: sugar icon labelling that shows teaspoon amounts, limits on marketing to children, and water-only policies in schools.

Classroom activities can only do so much, Dr Amso says.

Improving oral health also needs national policy that makes the healthier choice the easier one.

“Tooth decay is largely preventable, yet it remains one of the most common chronic diseases in New Zealand.

“Reducing sugar consumption must be a central priority for national health policy.”

NZDA's [Oral Health Roadmap](#) calls for stronger regulation of sugar in food and drinks, including a tax on sugar-sweetened beverages in line with World Health Organization guidance.

At least 116 countries had introduced a sugar-sweetened beverage tax as of 2024, and health economists estimate a 10% price rise can cut consumption by around 12%.

“We know a sugar tax works overseas, the evidence is there,” Dr Amso says.

“In election year, we're urging the Government and all parties to look at a tax on sugary drinks, a national sugar-reduction strategy, and healthier food environments in schools and communities. Treatment alone can't fix this, so prevention has to sit at the centre of health policy.”

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