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Children’s Dental Health

How to take care of your baby’s teeth and gums

One of the most exciting milestones for new parents is seeing their baby’s first teeth appear. To keep those teeth healthy and beautiful, you’ll want to make good choices about your baby’s dental hygiene. By taking good care of your baby’s teeth and gums, you’re giving your little one a great start on a lifetime of excellent oral health.

Parents’ good oral care and habits influence their child’s health.

Did you know that when you care for your teeth, you’re caring for your baby’s teeth, too? That’s because germs from your mouth can be easily passed to your baby’s mouth through kissing or sharing a spoon. Bacteria causes gum disease and tooth decay. Bacteria from your mouth may end up in your baby’s mouth, causing decay.

In brief:
- Take care of your own teeth so you don’t pass decay-causing bacteria to your baby
- Never put your baby to bed with a bottle of milk, formula, fruit juice or sweetened liquids
- Brush your baby’s teeth as soon as they come in
- Schedule a dentist visit for your baby within the first year
Avoid baby bottle tooth decay.

Baby bottle tooth decay\(^1\) occurs when your baby’s teeth are exposed to sugary liquids for long periods of time. It frequently occurs when babies suck on a bottle all day or are put to bed with a bottle. If the bottle contains milk, formula, juice or other sweetened liquids, it leaves a sugary film on your baby’s teeth, leading to decay and infection. Breast-feeding is considered the better way to feed your baby, but remember not to let them sleep while still feeding, because this practice leaves them vulnerable to baby bottle tooth decay as well.

Even though babies eventually lose their first teeth, tooth decay in baby teeth is serious. Unchecked, it can lead to poor eating habits, speech problems, oral infection, and discolored, crooked or damaged adult teeth.\(^2\)

Gently clean your baby’s gums and teeth.

Starting at birth, clean your baby’s gums with a soft cloth and water. When teeth begin to come in, start brushing twice daily with a little smear of fluoridated toothpaste and a child’s soft toothbrush. As children get older, they can brush their own teeth, but you need to help to make sure the teeth get really clean.

Schedule a visit with the dentist.

Ask your dentist when they would like to see your child for a first visit. Usually this will be when the first tooth comes in, between six and 12 months of age. The earlier the first dentist visit occurs, the better your chances of preventing dental problems.

How to keep your child’s teeth healthy

Good habits for a lifetime of oral health.

In the United States, tooth decay affects more children than any other chronic infectious disease.\(^2\) Untreated, decay can lead to painful infections that can cause problems with eating, speaking and learning.

The good news is that tooth decay in children is very preventable. By teaching good dental hygiene, encouraging good nutrition and scheduling regular dental visits, you can give your child the gift of healthy teeth and gums.

Brush and floss the germs away.

When your child’s teeth first appear, brush them with a soft toothbrush twice daily. When your child is preschool age, add a pea-sized dab of fluoride toothpaste. Don’t use more because young children tend to swallow toothpaste and ingesting too much fluoride can cause tooth stains.\(^3\) As they get older, children can brush their own teeth, but young children are not able to get their teeth really clean. For that reason, parents should do the final brushing until children are seven or eight.
When a child’s back teeth start to touch each other, it’s time to start flossing. That’s because toothbrush bristles can’t reach between back teeth, leaving those areas vulnerable to bacteria.

Serve healthy meals and limit sugary snacks.
Provide well-balanced meals made up of nutritious choices from the five basic food groups: fruits, vegetables, meats and proteins, dairy products and grains. After meals, children should brush their teeth or rinse with water. To avoid tooth decay, limit sugary snacks and drinks between meals. Whenever sugar comes in contact with your child’s teeth, they are attacked by decay-causing acids for 20 minutes or more.

Visit the dentist early.
Take your child for a first dentist visit when teeth begin to appear, or around their first birthday. This gives the dentist a chance to look for early problems and advise you about diet, bottles, daily oral care and any other dental requirements.

One issue to discuss with your dentist is fluoride. Fluoride strengthens teeth by hardening the tooth enamel. If you have fluoridated tap water at home, your child already receives supplemental fluoride. If you don’t, talk to your dentist about providing extra fluoride treatments.

Another tool for preventing decay is sealants. Dental sealants are thin plastic coatings the dentist paints onto the chewing surfaces of your child’s back teeth, for both primary and permanent molars, where most decay begins. Getting sealants is fast, easy and painless for your child. Depending on your benefit program, sealants are usually covered as a preventive service, requiring little or no out-of-pocket payment.

By taking these simple steps when your children are young, you can help them establish good oral hygiene habits that will keep their teeth and gums strong and healthy.

In brief:
- Help your child brush twice a day with a dab of fluoride toothpaste
- Give your child regular nutritious meals and limit between-meal snacks
- Take your child to the dentist regularly, and talk to your dentist about fluoride supplements
- When your child’s first molars come in, talk to your dentist about dental sealants
Prefering Kids for Their First Dental Checkup

Worried about your child’s first dental visit? Finding the right dentist and preparing your child can help make the experience pleasant.

If your child is afraid of new situations, you might expect some drama as he or she slides into the dentist’s chair for the first time. Even a generally calm child may be a bit uneasy.

These suggestions can help you prepare your little one for that first office visit and lower the level of stress when it’s time to open wide:

- Before the visit, read children’s books in which the main character visits the dentist with your child. Your child will be able to visualize what to expect, easing his or her fear of the unknown.
- Don’t pass your own fears of the dentist on to your child. Telling your child not to be afraid will just make him or her wonder what there is to fear.
- Don’t offer more information than your child asks for. Saying that he or she may need Novocain – and explaining what it is – will only add to your child’s fears. And it may turn out that Novocain won’t be needed.
- Schedule the appointment for a time of day when your child is awake, alert, and pleasant. Many children aren’t at their best right before or just after a nap.

Finding the right dentist

Ask the dentist how often he or she sees children in the office. Studies show that children tend to be more relaxed when the dentist uses kid-friendly techniques. When looking for a dentist, ask what measures the dentist and his or her staff take to keep their patients relaxed and comfortable. Listen for things such as:

- Remaining patient with fearful children
- Talking calmly and using humor and distraction to help reduce stress
- Focusing on and praising a child’s positive behavior while ignoring the negative
- Showing children instruments before using them, explaining what they are used for, and trying them out on the child’s fingers to demonstrate that they don’t cause pain

Nitrous oxide

You may want the option of sedation in case your child becomes especially fearful or requires extensive dental work. If so, ask if the dentist uses nitrous oxide in such situations. After breathing a mixture of nitrous oxide and oxygen through a mask, children become relaxed but remain awake. They are able to talk, and can respond to and understand the dentist. Nitrous oxide is often called “laughing gas” because it can cause giddiness.

Finding a good fit

When you choose a dentist, look for a pleasant, caring, and supportive practice. If you don’t feel the dentist or staff is showing your child the proper respect and patience, don’t hesitate to find another dentist.


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