



## Teach Your Child Good Oral Hygiene Habits Early!

The American Dental Association recommends creating a dental routine early to ensure a lifetime of healthy smiles for your child. Baby teeth are important teeth, and cavity prevention starts even before the first tooth appears. Did you know that just because babies don't have any visible teeth, doesn't mean they can't get cavities? A baby's 20 primary teeth are already present in the jaws at birth. Baby teeth that begin coming through the gums around 6 months help set the stage for future smiles by keeping space in the jaw for adult teeth.

Sucking is a natural reflex. Infants and young children may suck on thumbs, fingers, pacifiers and other objects. It may help them relax or make them feel safe. Pacifiers dipped in sugar, honey, juice or sweetened drinks, can lead to tooth decay. Tooth decay can also begin when cavity-causing bacteria pass from saliva in a caregiver's mouth to the infant. When the mother puts the baby's feeding spoon in her mouth, or cleans a pacifier in her mouth, the bacteria can be passed to the baby. For bottle feedings, place only formula, milk or breast milk inside and avoid using sugary beverages such as juice or soda. Infants should finish their bedtime and naptime bottle before going to bed. Encourage children to drink from a cup by their first birthday and discourage frequent or prolonged use of sippy cups.

You can help prevent your baby from getting cavities by beginning an oral hygiene routine within the first few days after birth. Begin cleaning your baby's mouth by wiping the gums with a clean, moist gauze pad or washcloth. When your child's teeth begin to come in, brush them gently with a child-size toothbrush and water. A baby's front four teeth usually push through the gums at about 6 months of age, although some children don't have their first tooth until 12 or 14 months. For children older than 2, brush their teeth with a pea-sized amount of fluoride toothpaste. Be sure they spit out the toothpaste. (Ask your child's dentist or physician if you are considering using fluoride toothpaste before age 2.) When your child has two teeth that touch sides, you should begin flossing their teeth daily.

Children need strong, healthy teeth to chew their food, speak, and have a good-looking smile. What's more, a good diet is essential for a child's growth and development. Almost all foods, including milk or vegetables, have some type of sugar, which can contribute to tooth decay. To help control the amount of sugar your child consumes, always try to read food labels and choose foods and beverages that are low in added sugars. Also, select beverages, such as water, that hydrate and contribute to good nutrition.

A balanced diet should include fruits and vegetables, grains, dairy and proteins. Half of what your child eats every day should be fruits and vegetables. Oatmeal, whole wheat bread and brown rice are good sources of whole grains. Make lean protein choices: lean beef, skinless poultry and fish. Try to vary protein choices to include eggs, beans, peas, and legumes. Be sure to also serve nutritious snacks and limit sweets to special occasions.

Fluoride is a mineral that occurs naturally in all water sources, including oceans, rivers and lakes. Fluoride is also added to some community tap water, toothpastes and mouth rinses. Infants and toddlers who do not receive an adequate amount of fluoride may be at an increased risk for tooth decay since fluoride helps make tooth enamel more resistant to decay. It also helps repair weakened enamel. Discuss your child's fluoride needs with your dentist or pediatrician. They may recommend a fluoride supplement if you live in an area where the community water is not fluoridated.

As soon as your child's first tooth appears, it's time to schedule a dental visit. The ADA recommends no later than a child's first birthday. Don't wait for them to start school or until there's an emergency. Get your child comfortable today with good mouth-healthy habits.

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