

Taking care of your child's smile

As soon as your baby's teeth break through the gums, they need attention and care.

In fact, the American Dental Association recommends that you bring your baby to the dentist soon after the first tooth comes in and no later than the child's first birthday. This visit gives your dentist a chance to check for tooth decay and discuss other conditions or habits, such as thumb sucking, that may affect the teeth. The dentist also can show you how to clean your baby's teeth properly.

As soon as the first tooth comes into place, start brushing your child's teeth with a toothbrush designed for children. For children younger than 3 years, place on the toothbrush only a smear of fluoride-containing toothpaste or an amount about the size of a grain of rice (Figure, left). For children 3 to 6 years of age, you should place no more than a pea-sized amount of fluoride-containing toothpaste on the toothbrush (Figure, right). Brush the child's teeth gently twice every day (morning and night) or as directed by your dentist.

Fluoride is an important cavity fighter. It can be swallowed (also called "systemic") or applied to the surface of the tooth (also called "topical"). Systemic fluoride, such as that contained in water and other beverages and in prescription fluoride supplements, interacts with teeth before they come through the gums—or erupt. It strengthens the developing tooth enamel, helping it fight tooth decay in the future. After teeth erupt, topical fluoride, such as that



in fluoride toothpastes and rinses, helps rebuild weakened tooth enamel from the outside. In this way, topical fluoride even can reverse the beginnings of tooth decay.

Although fluoride toothpaste is a good source of topical fluoride, it should not be swallowed. It contains more fluoride than fluoridated water or fluoride supplements,

and swallowing it every day can affect the color on the developing permanent teeth that have not yet erupted. Toothpaste is not candy. Use only the recommended amount on the brush and tell your child to spit out—not swallow—the foamy paste.

CARING FOR PERMANENT TEETH

Permanent teeth should start coming in when your child is 6 or 7 years old, and they will continue to erupt



Figure. When brushing your child's teeth, use a toothbrush made for children. For children younger than 3 years, place on the toothbrush a smear of fluoride-containing toothpaste or an amount about the size of a grain of rice (left). For children 3 to 6 years of age, place no more than a pea-sized amount of fluoride-containing toothpaste (right) on the toothbrush.

throughout the teenage years and possibly even into the early adult years. Brushing twice a day for two minutes with a fluoride-containing toothpaste and cleaning between the teeth once daily with floss or another interdental cleaner will be important habits for your child to adopt. Regular dental checkups also are essential for good oral health. Checkups allow your dentist to identify problems, such as tooth decay, and begin treatment as soon as possible. They also allow for professional cleanings and fluoride applications that will keep your child's teeth strong.

Your dentist may suggest applying dental sealants to the chewing surfaces of your child's back teeth (premolars and molars) to help protect against tooth decay. These chewing surfaces have deep pits and grooves in which food and plaque can build up and destroy the enamel surface of your child's teeth.

Caring for your child's mouth from the start is key to good oral health. Talk with your dentist about ways to give your child a healthy smile for life.

CHOOSING DENTAL PRODUCTS

When shopping for products to help you care for your child's teeth—or your own—look for the ADA Seal of Acceptance on the package. This Seal is given to products that have met the ADA's guidelines for safety and effectiveness. ■

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"For the Patient" provides general information on dental treatments to dental patients. It is designed to prompt discussion between dentist and patient about treatment options and does not substitute for the dentist's professional assessment based on the individual patient's needs and desires.

Baby Bottle Tooth Decay— How to Prevent It

Proper dental care is a lifelong commitment that starts even before your baby's first tooth forms. While daily cleanings and fluoride are important, they alone may not prevent Baby Bottle Tooth Decay (BBTD), a major cause of tooth decay in infants. Baby Bottle Tooth Decay is costly to treat. If left untreated, however, it can quickly destroy the teeth involved. It also can lead to pain, infection, early loss of baby teeth, crooked permanent teeth, and an increased risk of decay in permanent teeth. When you consider the possible dental problems that can result from BBTD and the cost of treating those problems, it is best to prevent BBTD from developing in the first place.

How Does Baby Bottle Tooth Decay Develop?

Baby Bottle Tooth Decay can develop if your child's teeth and gums are in prolonged contact with almost any liquid other than water. This can happen from putting your child to bed with a bottle of formula, milk, juice, soft drinks, sugar water, sugared drinks, etc. Allowing your baby to suck on a bottle or breastfeed for longer than a mealtime, either when awake or asleep, also can cause BBTD.

When liquid from a baby bottle builds up in the mouth, the natural or added sugars found in the liquid are changed to acid by germs in the mouth. This acid then starts to dissolve the teeth (mainly the upper front teeth), causing them to decay. Baby Bottle Tooth Decay can lead to severe damage to your child's baby teeth and also can cause dental problems that affect your child's permanent teeth.

Why Are Baby Teeth Important?

Many parents assume that decay does not matter in baby teeth because the teeth will fall out anyway, but decay in baby teeth poses risks. If your child loses his baby teeth too early because of decay or infection, the permanent teeth will not be ready to replace them yet. Baby teeth act as a guide for the permanent teeth. If baby teeth are lost too early, the teeth that are left may shift position to fill in the gaps. This may not leave any room for the permanent teeth to come in.

What Can I Do to Prevent Baby Bottle Tooth Decay?

Take the following steps to prevent Baby Bottle Tooth Decay:

- Never put your child to bed with a bottle. By 7 or 8 months of age, most children no longer need feedings during the night. Children who drink bottles while lying down also may be more prone to getting ear infections.
- Only give your baby a bottle during meals. Do not use the bottle as a pacifier; do not allow your child to walk around with it or to drink it for extended periods. These practices not only may lead to BBTD, but children can suffer tooth injuries if they fall while sucking on a bottle.
- Teach your child to drink from a cup as soon as possible, usually by 1 year of age. Drinking from a cup does not cause the liquid to collect around the teeth, and a cup cannot be taken to bed. If you are concerned that a cup may be messier than a bottle, especially when you are away from home, use one that has a snap-on lid with a straw or a special valve to prevent spilling.
- If your child must have a bottle for long periods, fill it only with water.

Keeping your baby's mouth clean is also important in preventing tooth decay. After feedings, gently brush your baby's gums and any baby teeth with a soft infant toothbrush.

Start using water and a soft child-sized toothbrush for daily cleanings once your child has seven to eight teeth. By the time your toddler is 2 years of age, you should be brushing her teeth once or twice a day, preferably after breakfast and before bedtime.

Begin using a fluoride toothpaste when you are sure the toothpaste will not be swallowed (usually when your child is around 3 years of age). Use a pea-sized amount of toothpaste to limit the amount your child can swallow. Too much fluoride can be harmful to a child.

Detect Decay Early

Baby Bottle Tooth Decay first shows up as white spots on the upper front teeth. These spots are hard to see at first—even for a pediatrician or dentist—without proper equipment. A child with tooth decay needs to get treatment early to stop the decay from spreading and to prevent lasting damage to the teeth.

If you are concerned that your child may have BBTD, your pediatrician can refer you to a pediatric dentist who will carefully examine your child's teeth for signs of decay.

With the right balance of proper home and professional dental care, your child can grow up to have healthy teeth for a lifetime of smiles.

The information contained in this publication should not be used as a substitute for the medical care and advice of your pediatrician. There may be variations in treatment that your pediatrician may recommend based on individual facts and circumstances.

American Academy
of Pediatrics



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