

First Steps to a Healthy Smile

Tooth decay is the number-one dental problem among preschoolers, but it can be prevented. Starting children with good dental habits from an early age will help them grow up with healthy smiles. The following is important information about how to care for your child's teeth from birth to 24 months of age and beyond.

Baby teeth are important!

Tooth decay can develop as soon as the first tooth appears. It's important to care for your child's baby teeth because they act as placeholders for adult teeth. If baby teeth are lost too early, the teeth that are left may move and not leave any room for the adult teeth to come in. And tooth decay in baby teeth can be painful and cause health problems like infections, which can at times be life-threatening. It can also lead to teasing and speech development problems.

How to care for your child's teeth

Birth to 12 months

- Good dental habits should begin before the first tooth appears. After feedings, gently brush your baby's gums using water on a baby toothbrush that has soft bristles. Or wipe them with a clean washcloth.
- Ask about fluoride. After the first tooth appears, ask your child's doctor if your baby is getting enough fluoride. Many experts recommend using a fluoride-free toothpaste before the age of 2, but check with your child's doctor or dentist first.
- Schedule your baby's well-child visits. During these visits your child's doctor will check your baby's mouth.
- Schedule a dental checkup. If your baby is at high risk for tooth decay, your child's doctor will recommend that your baby see a dentist.

12 to 24 months

- Brush! Brush your child's teeth 2 times a day using water on a baby toothbrush that has soft bristles. The best times are after breakfast and before bed.
- Limit juice. Make sure your child doesn't drink more than 1 small cup of juice each day and only at mealtimes.
- Consult with your child's dentist or doctor about sucking habits. Sucking too strongly on a pacifier, a thumb, or fingers can affect the shape of the mouth and how the top and bottom teeth line up. This is called your child's "bite." Ask your child's dentist or doctor to help you look for changes in your child's bite and how to help your child ease out of his sucking habit.
- Schedule a dental checkup. Take your child for a dental checkup if he has not had one.

24 months

- Brush! Help your child brush her teeth 2 times a day with a child-sized toothbrush that has soft bristles. There are brushes designed to address the different needs of children at all ages, ensuring that you can select a toothbrush that is appropriate for your child.
Encourage her to brush her teeth on her own. However, to make sure your child's teeth are clean, you should brush them again. If your child doesn't want her teeth brushed, it may help to turn it into a game. For example, the toothbrush can look upstairs and downstairs in the mouth for missing treasure in the teeth.
- Use fluoride toothpaste. You can start using fluoride toothpaste, which helps prevent cavities. Teach your child not to swallow it. Use a pea-sized amount or less and smear the paste into the bristles. Swallowing too much fluoride toothpaste can make white or brown spots on your child's adult teeth. If your child doesn't like the taste of the toothpaste, try another flavor or use plain water.
- Floss. You can begin flossing your child's teeth as soon as 2 teeth touch each other. But not all children need their teeth flossed at this age, so check with your dentist first.
- Schedule a dental checkup. Take your child for a dental checkup at least once a year.

Eating and tooth decay

Parents, especially if they have a history of cavities, can pass germs that cause cavities and gum disease if they share food or drinks with their children. Germs can also be spread when parents lick their children's spoon, fork, or pacifier. This is why it is important for parents to not share food or drinks with their children.

The following are other ways parents can help prevent tooth decay in their babies and children:

- If you put your child to bed with a bottle, fill it only with water.
- If your child drinks from a bottle or sippy cup, make sure to fill it only with water when it's not mealtime.
- If your child wants a snack, offer a healthy snack like fruits or vegetables. (To avoid choking, make sure anything you give your child is soft, easy to swallow, and cut into small pieces no larger than one-half inch.)
- Avoid sweet or sticky snacks like candy, cookies, or Fruit Roll-Ups. There is sugar in foods like crackers and chips too. They should only be eaten at mealtime.
- If your child is thirsty, give him water or milk. If your child drinks milk at bedtime, make sure to clean his teeth afterward. Don't let your child sip drinks that have sugar and acid, like juices, sports drinks, flavored drinks, lemonade, soda pop, or flavored teas.

What is a cavity?

Your child's teeth are protected by an outer coating called *enamel*. Tooth decay happens when germs in the mouth mix with sugar in foods and drinks. The germs then make acids that break down the enamel. Cavities are holes in the enamel caused by tooth decay.

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.

Note: Products are mentioned for informational purposes only and do not imply an endorsement by the American Academy of Pediatrics. This brochure has been developed by the American Academy of Pediatrics. The authors and contributors are expert authorities in the field of pediatrics. No commercial involvement of any kind has been solicited or accepted in the development of the content of this publication.

From your doctor

American Academy
of Pediatrics



DEDICATED TO THE HEALTH OF ALL CHILDREN™

The American Academy of Pediatrics is an organization of 60,000 primary care pediatricians, pediatric medical subspecialists, and pediatric surgical specialists dedicated to the health, safety, and well-being of infants, children, adolescents, and young adults.
American Academy of Pediatrics
Web site—www.aap.org
Copyright © 2008
American Academy of Pediatrics