

TOOTH DECAY IN YOUNG CHILDREN: YOU CAN PREVENT IT!

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Children need strong, healthy teeth to chew their food, speak and have a good-looking smile. Pain and suffering due to untreated tooth and gum diseases can lead to problems in eating, speaking, and attending to learn. Baby teeth also keep a space in the jaw for the adult teeth. If a baby tooth is lost too early, the teeth beside it may drift into the empty space. When it's time for the adult teeth to come in, there may not be enough room. This can make the teeth crooked or crowded. Good oral care can help protect children's teeth for decades to come.

According to the American Dental Association, Early Childhood Caries (cavities) is an **infectious disease** defined as the presence of one or more decayed, missing (due to cavities) or filled tooth surfaces in any primary tooth in a preschool-age child between birth and 71 months of age (5 years and 11 months). The Association acknowledges that dental caries are the most prevalent chronic disease of childhood. More than 51 million school hours are lost each year to dental-related illness in the United States. (Surgeon General) For 2–4 year-olds, the prevalence of dental cavities in primary teeth has increased from approximately 18% to 24% between 1988–1994 and 1999–2004. According to the Centers of Disease Control, 49.8% of Arizona kindergarteners have untreated tooth decay. Baby bottle

tooth decay or early childhood cavities are preventable. Baby teeth are at risk for decay as soon as they first appear around 6 months of age. Tooth decaying bacteria do not naturally occur in the mouths of children, they are passed down through the transfer of saliva from the caregiver. Sharing a spoon or cleaning a pacifier in the mouth of adults or other children passes these bacteria to the child.

Tooth decay in children may also appear when baby teeth are exposed to frequent and prolonged exposure to liquids that contain sugar (sweetened water, fruit juice, milk, breast milk and formula). This decay occurs when that baby or child is put to bed with the bottle, or when a bottle is used as a pacifier for a fussy baby. The naturally occurring acids in the mouth break down this sugar, pool around the teeth when the child is not awake and swallowing, and may cause tooth decay. Pacifiers dipped in sugar or honey can cause tooth decay since the sugar or honey can provide food for the bacteria.

Infants and toddlers may not be getting enough fluoride. Fluoride combines with the outer covering of the tooth (enamel) and makes the tooth more resistant to cavities. Fluoridation reduces tooth decay by about 25% over a person's lifetime. (CDC)

How to Prevent Baby Tooth Decay

The American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry found that nationally 48% of mothers reported that they do not regularly clean the gums of their infants before they have teeth. Twenty six percent of U.S. children are not brushing by the recommended age of one. Only 29% of children nationally have visited a dentist by the recommended age of one year old.

Dentist

Every child should see a dentist by at least age one or when the child's first tooth comes in, between the age of 6 and 12 months. It may be helpful to visit the dentist earlier to establish a dental home for a child. Early dental care and preventative care of the teeth will protect your child's smile now and in the future.

Cleaning

Begin cleaning the baby's mouth during the first few days after birth. After every feeding, wipe the baby's gums with a clean gauze pad, wash cloth, infant dental wipe or an infant toothbrush. When teeth begin to come in, clean the child's teeth at least twice a day with a toothbrush designed for small children. Use a small smear of toothpaste for children under two-years-old. For those over two, use a pea-sized amount of fluoridated toothpaste when helping children brush.

Fluoride for Babies

Even though the baby teeth have not begun to show, infants still need fluoride to help developing teeth grow strong. A pediatric dentist will determine the child's fluoride needs during the initial consultation. Children older than six months may need a fluoride supplement if their drinking water does not contain the ideal amount of fluoride. Fluoride has been shown to reduce tooth decay by as much as 50% (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention).

Bottles-Cups

Children should be weaned from the bottle at 12-14 months of age and taught to drink from a cup. Offer the bottle only at feeding time, not naptime. Keep the following points in mind for feeding young children:

- It is not recommended for babies less than 12 months of age to drink cow's milk, evaporated cow's milk or home-prepared evaporated cow's milk formula, sweetened condensed milk, goat's milk, soy milk, or imitation milks (including rice or nuts) or nondairy creamer.
- Do not feed juice from a bottle, use a cup.
- Do not leave a bottle in a baby's crib or play pen or prop bottles.
- Do not let a baby carry around and continuously drink from a bottle or sippy cup. Liquid from the bottle or sippy cup can pool around the teeth and produce acids that can cause serious tooth decay.

Pacifiers

The American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry recommends that children stop using pacifiers (or stop sucking their thumbs) when the teeth begin to emerge so that it does not cause damage to the growth of the jaw or bones or alignment of the teeth. If the child does not stop sucking his/her thumb or stop using pacifiers, intervention may be recommended for children beyond 3 years of age.

- Only give a baby a plain clean pacifier, rinsed in water.
- Never give a baby a pacifier dipped in honey, syrup, sugar, or other sweet substance.

Food

The following are guidelines for feeding young children:

- Do not feed a baby sweetened foods, such as lollipops, sweet candies, candy bars, cookies, cakes, or sweetened cereals, or sticky sweet foods such as dried fruit.
- If introducing these foods to toddlers, make sure to brush their teeth at least twice a day (more often if child is eating foods high in sugar).
- Breast-feeding is beneficial for baby's health and development. If children have poor diets, their teeth may not develop properly.
- Parents should select snacks for dental health and for general health (resource for information regarding healthy snacks: My Plate of the US Department of Agriculture).

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