

How to Prevent Tooth Decay in Your Baby

Taking good care of your child's teeth must start even before the first tooth appears. You can prevent tooth decay in your child by following healthy dental habits. Your pediatrician or pediatric dentist may also call a child's tooth decay *early childhood caries*. In the past it was called *baby bottle tooth decay*.

Tooth decay can develop as soon as the first tooth erupts. But brushing every day may not be enough to prevent it. If tooth decay is not prevented it can be costly to treat. If left untreated, it can destroy the teeth. This can cause infection, early loss of baby teeth, crooked adult teeth, and decay in adult teeth. Read on to find out how you can help prevent tooth decay from developing in your child.

What causes tooth decay?

Tooth decay develops when a child's teeth and gums are exposed to any liquids or foods other than water for long periods. The liquid or food collects around the teeth, and the natural or added sugars are changed to acid by bacteria in the mouth. This acid then dissolves the outer part of the teeth, causing them to decay.

The most common way this happens is when parents put their children to bed with a bottle of formula, milk, juice, soft drinks, sugar water, or sugared drinks. It can also occur when children are allowed to drink from a sippy cup, suck on a bottle, or breastfeed for long periods during the day or night.

Signs of tooth decay

Tooth decay first appears as white spots at the gum line 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 be examined and treated early to stop the decay from spreading and to prevent further damage.

How to prevent tooth decay

Take the following steps to prevent tooth decay:

- **Never put your child to bed with a bottle or food.** Not only does this expose your child's teeth to sugars, it can also put your child at risk for ear infections and choking.
- **Only give your child a bottle during meals.** Do not use a bottle or sippy cup as a pacifier or let your child walk around with or drink from them for long periods.
- **Teach your child to drink from a cup** as soon as possible. Drinking from a cup is less likely to cause the liquid to collect around the teeth. Also a cup cannot be taken to bed.
- **If your child must have a bottle or sippy cup** for long periods, fill it only with water. During car rides offer only water if your child is thirsty.

Why are baby teeth important?

Baby teeth act as place holders 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. Healthy baby teeth make for a beautiful smile. Decay in baby teeth can cause pain and life-threatening infection; may affect speech development; and may make eating painful, resulting in poor weight gain.

How to clean your child's teeth

Keep your baby's mouth clean by gently brushing the gums and teeth with water and a soft infant toothbrush or gauze. Once your baby has 8 teeth, you can start using a child-sized toothbrush for daily cleanings.

Brush your child's teeth 2 times a day. The best times to brush are after breakfast and before bed. Start by using a fluoride-free toothpaste. When your child is able to spit and not swallow the toothpaste (usually around 2 to 3 years old), you should continue brushing his or her teeth using a pea-sized amount of toothpaste containing fluoride. Swallowing too much toothpaste with fluoride in it can cause white and brown spots on your child's developing adult teeth. Most children are not able to brush their teeth by themselves until they are 6 to 8 years old, when their hand coordination and understanding of thorough plaque removal are better.

Remember

Tooth decay can be prevented. Talk with your pediatrician or pediatric dentist if you see any signs of decay in your child's teeth or you simply have questions about the teeth. With the right care, your child can grow up to have healthy teeth for a lifetime of smiles.

The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that all infants receive oral health risk assessments by 6 months of age. Infants at higher risk of early tooth decay should be referred to a dentist as early as 6 months of age and no later than 6 months after the first tooth erupts or 12 months of age (whichever comes first).

All children in their early toddler years should have a complete dental exam by a dentist.

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

From your doctor

