

A Guide to Children's Dental Health



The road to a bright smile begins long before the first tooth breaks through the gum. Parents play a big part in helping their children develop healthy teeth. Early monitoring by a pediatrician or dentist is important.

Steps to good dental health include

- Regular care by a dental professional
- Getting enough fluoride
- Regular brushing and flossing
- Eating right

It's important for parents to care for their teeth too because cavity-causing bacteria can be easily transferred when sharing food or drinks. By following these steps and teaching them to your children, your entire family can benefit from good dental health.

Read more to learn why fluoride is important, when to start cleaning your child's teeth, if pacifier use or thumb sucking hurt teeth, about foods that can lead to tooth decay, about pediatric dentists, and good dental habits.

Why is fluoride important?

Fluoride is a natural chemical that can be added to drinking water and toothpaste. It strengthens *tooth enamel* (the hard outer coating on teeth). Fluoride also helps repair early damage to teeth.

The fluoride content of local water supplies varies. Check with your local water department to find out the exact water fluoride level in your area. Then talk with your child's pediatrician or dentist to see if she needs additional fluoride, such as fluoride drops or tablets. The need for fluoride is based on your child's *caries* (tooth decay) risk.

When should I start cleaning my child's teeth?

Daily dental cleaning should start as soon as your infant's first tooth appears. Wipe the teeth with a piece of gauze or a damp cloth. Switch to a toothbrush with a fluoride toothpaste as your child gets older. Because children tend to swallow toothpaste, put only a small (pea-sized) amount of fluoride toothpaste on your child's toothbrush and press the toothpaste into the bristles. Taking in too much fluoride while brushing can result in *fluorosis* (spotting of the teeth).

Also, check the teeth for early signs of tooth decay. Cavities appear as white, yellow, or brown spots or lines on the teeth. Any 2 teeth that are touching each other should be flossed to prevent a cavity from forming between the teeth. An ideal baby bite should have spaces between the front teeth. If your child's teeth are touching early, this is a sign that dental crowding may occur in the adult teeth that may require future orthodontic care.

Does pacifier use or thumb sucking hurt teeth?

If a child sucks strongly on a pacifier, his thumb, or his fingers, this habit may affect the shape of his mouth or how his teeth are lining up. If a child stops using a pacifier by 3 years of age, his bite will most likely correct itself. If a child stops sucking on a pacifier, his thumb, or his fingers before his permanent front teeth come in, there's a chance his bite will correct itself. If your child continues his sucking habit after his adult teeth have come in, then orthodontic care may be needed to realign his teeth.

Food that can lead to tooth decay

Sweets like candy or cookies can lead to tooth decay. Sugar from fruits and fruit juices left on the teeth for a long time is not healthy for teeth. Frequent sipping on drinks such as fruit juices and sodas can also cause tooth decay. Starchy foods, such as crackers, and sticky foods and candies, such as raisins, fruit roll-ups, and gummy bears, tend to stay on the teeth longer. These foods also are more likely to lead to tooth decay.

Starches and fruits, however, are a necessary part of any child's diet. To avoid tooth decay, give your child these foods only at mealtime (before the teeth have been brushed). For healthy teeth, offer your child a well-balanced diet with a variety of foods. Drinking water with fluoride is an excellent way to keep teeth healthy.

Pediatric dentists

During regular well-child visits, your child's pediatrician will check her teeth and gums to make sure they are healthy. If your child has dental problems, your child's pediatrician may refer her to a dental professional.

A pediatric dentist specializes in the care of children's teeth, but some general dentists also treat children. Pediatricians may refer children younger than 1 year to a dental professional if the child

- Chips or injures a tooth or has an injury to the face or mouth.
- Has teeth that show any signs of discoloration. This could be a sign of tooth decay.
- Complains of tooth pain or is sensitive to hot or cold foods or liquids. This could also be a sign of decay.
- Has any abnormal lesion (growth) inside the mouth.
- Has an unusual bite—the teeth do not fit together right.

Good dental habits

Regular dental checkups, a balanced diet, fluoride, injury prevention, habit control, and brushing and flossing are all important for healthy teeth. Starting children off with good dental habits now will help them grow up with healthy smiles.

The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) recommends that all infants receive oral health risk assessments by 6 months of age. Infants at higher risk of early dental caries 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 should have a comprehensive dental exam by a dentist in the early toddler years.

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.

From your doctor

