



Caring for Children's Dental Health

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It may seem easy to overlook children's dental health. Babies don't have teeth until they're several months old and children's baby (or primary) teeth are just going to fall out anyway. However, poor oral health can have a serious impact on health and development. A few key considerations can help ensure your children's dental health and teeth are strong as they grow.

Importance of Children's Dental Health

Once the baby teeth have come in, they can get cavities. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "More than 1 in 5 children aged 2 to 5 years has at least one cavity in their baby teeth." Cavities are painful, of course, but they can also harm children's learning and development as well as contribute to other health problems. Studies have shown that children with poor dental health miss more days of school and do not perform as well. Fortunately, there are easy steps parents can take.¹

Start Before Birth

Good children's dental health starts during pregnancy. Gum disease is more common during pregnancy. One study estimated that gingivitis affects nearly 60 to 75% of pregnant women. A more advanced form of gum disease, periodontitis, has been connected to complications like preterm birth and low birth weight though why this may happen isn't clear.²

This, along with the potential to pass bacteria to the baby's mouth, means that regular dental care is an important part of prenatal care. Regular cleaning and dental visits while pregnant helps to prevent gum disease and cavities that can happen while pregnant – and helps protect baby's mouth in the process.³

Don't Ignore Infant Gums

Your baby's chompers may not have grown in yet, but they still require care and attention. Breast milk and formula can still leave behind sugars that can contribute to bacterial growth or decay of emerging teeth. Experts recommend gentle wiping gums with a clean cloth twice a day.

Once teeth start to emerge, use a wet toothbrush without toothpaste twice a day. The action of the bristles will wipe the teeth clean, and it helps build the habit for future brushing. While fluoride toothpaste is important for school-age children, it shouldn't be used for children younger than 2. For children younger than 6, use a small amount and monitor brushing and spitting.

Limit Sugar

Limiting sugary foods and drinks is essential to good dental health for children of all ages. Candy and other sticky, sweet treats are clear problems but don't forget about sugary drinks. Milk and juice may seem healthy, but they can contain

¹ [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#), "Children's Dental Health"

² [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#), "Pregnancy and Oral Health"

³ [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#), "Children's Oral Health"

large amounts of sugar. Serve any juice in small, limited amounts. Water is the best choice for mealtimes and throughout the day.⁴

Children who have constant access to milk or juice or take a bottle of it to bed are at risk for “bottlemouth syndrome.” The sugars left on the teeth overnight and throughout the day can cause severe tooth decay in very young children. It may even require oral surgery to correct. Symptoms include red gums and an irritated mouth.⁵

Work Dental Health into Routine

Developing a brushing habit will reinforce the importance of dental health, and perhaps more importantly, help limit toddler resistance. The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends a [“Brush, Book, Bed”](#) routine. Bedtime routines and a consistent bedtime promote better sleep and ease bedtime stress. Adding brushing and books helps with dental health and early literacy skills as well.

Building Strong Dental Health Habits

Once your child is old enough to safely and effectively brush on their own, the guidance is similar to dental health advice for adults. This means brushing for two minutes twice a day using fluoride toothpaste and regularly visiting the dentist. Children should visit the dentist once their first teeth appear and before their first birthday. As they get older, they should get a cleaning every six months.

Since older children have more choice in what they eat, you may not always be able to swap candy for fruit. Healthy habits developed when they were younger will be important in encouraging healthy choices and establishing a foundation for a lifetime of good oral health.

⁴ [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#), “Children’s Dental Health”

⁵ [HealthyChildren.org](#), “Bottlemouth Syndrome”