



### Dental Care for Children

**Fact:**

Good dental care can help set up a child for a lifetime of healthy smiles.

**Fiction:**

It's a myth that baby teeth aren't important.

**Prevention:**

Prevention includes a balance of daily care, checkups and good food.

**Treatment:**

Children may need fillings and even extractions at a very young age.

From that first baby tooth through the teen years, children need regular preventive care, good dental hygiene and sound nutrition. Teeth affect eating, speech development and even appearance and self-esteem.

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### About Baby Teeth

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Our first set of teeth, referred to as baby teeth, milk teeth or temporary teeth, start erupting around six or seven months of age. Most children have all 20 by age 2 ½. Besides being useful for chewing and pretty smiles, baby teeth hold the place for permanent teeth. If baby teeth are lost too early, other teeth move to fill their place and the replacement permanent teeth may grow in crooked or crowded.

The major cause of tooth decay in infants and children is baby bottle tooth decay. It can destroy teeth, most often the upper front teeth. Decay occurs when sweetened liquids, including milk, formula and fruit juice, are left clinging to an infant's teeth through prolonged bottle use. Bacteria eat the sugar in these liquids and then produce acids that attack the teeth. Each time your child drinks these liquids in a bottle, acids attack for 20 minutes or longer. Giving such a bottle many times a day is a bad idea, as is letting your child fall asleep with a bottle during naps or at bedtime.

With infants and small children:

- Wipe the baby's gums with a clean gauze pad after each feeding
- Begin brushing the child's teeth when the first tooth erupts, and clean and massage gums in areas that remain toothless
- Begin flossing when all the baby teeth have erupted, usually by age 2 or 2½
- Never allow a child to fall asleep with a bottle containing milk, formula, fruit juice or sweetened liquids. For a comforter, use a clean pacifier recommended by a dentist or physician.
- Avoiding feeding sugar water and soft drinks
- If the local water supply does not contain fluoride, ask a dentist how your child can obtain it
- Start dental visits by the child's first birthday, and make regular visits
- Take your child to the dentist as soon as possible if you suspect problems

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### Permanent Teeth

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As children grow older, their baby teeth start falling out and the permanent teeth start erupting. Permanent teeth need as much careful attention as baby teeth.

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## Risk Factors for Dental Problems

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A child's risk of developing dental problems increases with:

- A high-risk pregnancy or difficult delivery
- Birth defects or developmental disabilities
- A family history of moderate to severe dental disease
- Prolonged use of nursing bottles
- High levels of bacteria in the saliva
- Limited access to dental treatment
- Frequent illness or taking medications for long periods of time
- Smoke from cigarettes (secondhand smoke) which may contribute to the development of tooth decay and gum disease
- Lack of fluoride

Safety note: do not give children mouthwash that contains alcohol because they can be poisoned by drinking it.

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## Kids' Bad Habits

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Thumb or finger sucking gives many babies comfort. Beyond four or five years of age, consult a dentist because this can push upper front teeth forward and bottom teeth inwards.

Mouth breathing should be checked by the family doctor and corrected as soon as possible because it can lead to protruding upper front teeth and spacing between the upper and lower front teeth.

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## How to Brush Teeth

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Brushing removes plaque and food particles from all surfaces of each tooth.

- Hold the toothbrush just under the gum line at a 45-degree angle. Move the brush in tiny circles on the tooth and gums next to the tooth, including all inner and outer surfaces.
- For chewing surfaces, use a light back and forth motion.
- Massage gums with a finger.
- Gently brush the tongue.

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## Food for Teeth

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A balanced diet that promotes oral as well as general health includes foods from the four basic food groups: fruits and vegetables, breads and cereals, milk and dairy products and meat and fish. Crunchy vegetables and fruits not only provide nutrition, but also help clean our teeth.

In addition to eating good foods, children need to avoid sweets and sticky foods, especially between meals.

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