

Dental Health for Babies



Most babies start getting their first teeth between 6-12 months of age. You might be surprised to learn that as soon as that first tooth appears, it is vulnerable to cavities! Cavities can hurt and lead to other infections. Whether you breast-feed or bottle-feed your baby, here are some hints to help protect your baby's teeth.

Keep in mind that tooth decay is invisible at first.

- Dentists agree that sweet liquids that cling to a baby's teeth—even milk, formula, or juice—can be home to bacteria that cause decay. This decay is also called “baby bottle tooth decay” or “early childhood dental caries.”
- The dentist may want to see your baby when his first tooth appears or after his first birthday. If you see tan, brown, or black spots or pits on a baby tooth, especially a front tooth, take your baby to the dentist right away. He may already have tooth decay.

Help protect your baby from tooth decay.

- Gently take the baby from the breast or take the bottle from her mouth as soon as possible if she falls asleep while feeding. If the bottle stays in her mouth while she sleeps, the sweet liquid can pool around her teeth.
- Offer a bottle with cool water between regular feedings if a child is thirsty or wants a bottle for comfort. Remember that drinking water treated with the right amount of fluoride can help prevent cavities. Avoid giving juices, soda pop, or powdered soft drinks in the bottle.
- Stay away from baby bottles that look like bottles of soda pop. These may influence a child to choose soft drinks when he is older—a choice that can be very bad for teeth.
- Start teaching your baby to take water or juice in a cup shortly after her first tooth appears. She may need a lot of practice! A spill-proof cup with collapsible straw might help. Many dentists think that this design keeps sugary liquids away from the teeth better than other spill-proof cups do.
- Avoid pacifiers dipped in anything sweet.

Take good care of your baby's mouth.

- Clean breast milk, formula, juice, or any sweet liquid from your baby's teeth and gums to lower the risk of decay.
- Gently wipe a baby's gums with water at least once a day before he has teeth. Use a clean, damp piece of gauze, washcloth, or soft infant toothbrush. This time can be pleasant if you smile and talk to him: “This is how we clean your mouth!”
- Brush the teeth very gently at least once a day, starting when the first tooth comes in. Ask the dentist when to use toothpaste.

For related Web resources, see “Dental Health for Babies” at <http://illinoisearlylearning.org/tips.htm>.

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