

Right from the start: A maternal and infant health oral program*

Early childhood tooth decay

Did you know that tooth decay is the most common childhood disease? Forty percent of American children have cavities by age 6. Worst of all, if children get cavities in their baby teeth, the infection almost always passes to their permanent teeth. You can help prevent this disease.

Mom, your oral health matters

One of the biggest risks for your baby to get early tooth decay is the presence of dental cavities in your mouth. That's because tooth decay is a bacterial infection that can be transmitted from you to your baby. Everyone in the family should keep their teeth clean (brush and floss) to reduce the bacteria levels.

Sugar feeds tooth decay

The tooth decay bacteria use sugar for energy, and they produce an acid that dissolves calcium, which causes a hole in the tooth. Any food or drink with sugar is potentially a problem; this includes juices, sodas, sports drinks, infant formula, and sweetened milk. Remember, after age 1 cups are always better than bottles. Another common form of sugar that is often overlooked is cooked starch—the white flour that's in crackers, cereal, chips, and junk foods in general. Give your child whatever you feel is right and healthful, but be sure to clean their gums and teeth afterward.

Clean your baby's gums and teeth early (4 months)

The decay process can start as soon as the child's first tooth pokes out from the gum, typically at 5 to 9 months. To stop the attack from happening, it's important to begin cleaning baby's mouth very early, starting at 4 months. Simply wipe baby's gums and



teeth several times a day, especially after feedings.

The tooth-brushing habit (6 to 9 months)

Your child should be encouraged to brush their teeth themselves, as soon as they can hold a toothbrush, but parents should be there to supervise and complete the brushing. The night brushing is critical, as the bacteria that cause cavities have 12 hours or more to grow as your child sleeps. Make sure this brushing is done as effectively as possible to stop those cavity-causing bacteria from moving into your child's mouth as a permanent resident. A good rule of thumb is for parents to help with brushing until their child can write their name in cursive letters, which typically occurs at age 6 or 7.

Look closely and often at your baby's teeth (9 to 12 months)

The first sign of a cavity is a white spot. These spots often start on the upper front teeth at the gum line. To look for these spots, lay your baby in your lap and lift their upper lip using your fingers. If you don't take care of your baby's first teeth, your child may wind up with a lifelong struggle with tooth decay.

See the dentist at age 1

Starting at birth, every baby needs a "medical home" for regular doctor visits to ensure they stay healthy and get their vaccinations on time. Many parents don't realize that babies need a "dental home" after their baby's first birthday, or even sooner if there's a problem. The dentist can help you make sure your baby doesn't get early childhood tooth decay. It's a whole lot easier to prevent tooth decay than it is to treat it.

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