



# Infant dental care tips

Use these tips to take control of your child's dental health.

**B**aby bottle tooth decay, also called early childhood caries, is the leading dental condition that causes decay and tooth loss in young children. It is the presence of one or more decayed, missing or filled tooth surfaces in any primary tooth in children between birth and five years of age. The good news is, it is preventable.

This handy guide will help you take control of your child's future dental health. Having healthy habits and behaviors can reduce the risk of serious dental problems. Here are some tips to help keep your child's smile bright and healthy.

## What causes baby bottle tooth decay?

Baby bottle tooth decay occurs when teeth are exposed to sugary liquids for long periods of time. The use of milk, formula, fruit juice and soda leaves a sugary film on teeth, which leads to decay, broken teeth and infection.

## Is tooth decay in baby teeth serious?

Baby teeth provide a foundation and guidance for adult teeth. If a child has teeth with extensive decay, crowding or shifting, treatment is necessary to prevent more extensive problems in the future.

If baby teeth are infected or lost too early, the result for your child may be:

- Poor eating habits
- Speech problems
- Discolored, crooked or damaged adult teeth
- Oral infection that spreads and affects the overall health of the child

## How can I protect my baby's teeth?

- Never put your baby to bed with a bottle filled with milk, formula, fruit juice or sweetened liquids. If your baby relies on a bottle for comfort, fill the bottle with cool water.
- Limit the amount of sugar you give your child and provide healthy foods as recommended by your pediatrician.
- After feedings and before bedtime, use a fabric-covered finger or gauze pad to wipe your baby's teeth and gums to remove the sugary film that causes decay.

- Once teeth begin to erupt, you can use a soft child-sized toothbrush and water to clean your child's teeth.
- Use fluoride to protect teeth from decay. Find out if your community has fluoridated water. If not, ask your dentist or doctor about fluoride supplements for your child.
- Offer your baby a cup as soon as he or she can sit up alone. By the time your baby is one year old, he or she should not be using a bottle.
- Breast-feeding is the best way to feed your baby. Baby bottle tooth decay is not as common in breast-fed babies.
- Keep up with your own oral hygiene. The bacteria that cause tooth decay can be passed to children by close family members.

### What will your child's dentist do?

Be sure to begin taking your child for regular checkups before they reach their first birthday. If your child does not have a dentist yet but is seeing a pediatrician or family doctor, ask them to look at your child's teeth to determine if a referral to a dentist is recommended. If your child's dentist sees signs of early childhood decay, or believes your child may be at risk, she or he may suggest the following:

- More frequent examinations and cleanings to ensure that decay-causing bacteria are removed
- Fluoridated toothpaste for brushing at home – depending on the child's age, be sure to give the right amount, no more than the size of a pea for very young children
- Fluoride varnish applications in the office – this is a relatively new approach to applying fluoride in the office and has proven to be very effective in limiting tooth decay
- Supplements such as Xylitol, a naturally occurring sugar which inhibits the growth of bacteria thought to cause tooth decay – depending on your child's age, Xylitol can be applied as a spray, rinse, lozenge or chewing gum
- Once your child gets a little older, tooth sealants on back teeth

### Try these activities instead of giving your child a bottle at bedtime:

- Offer a blanket, soft toy or clean pacifier. Do not dip the pacifier in anything sweet.
- Sing or play music.
- Hold or rock your baby to sleep.
- Rub your child's head or back.
- Read to your child or tell a story.

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