

TOOTH CARE TIPS

Children usually get their first teeth between the ages of six months to one year and have a full set of twenty “baby teeth” by the age of three. Good dental care should begin even before these primary teeth come in. Many dentists recommend that parents wipe their infants gums after each feeding with a clean wet cloth. They also warn parents not to put their babies to bed with a bottle of milk or juice since pooling of the fluid around the upper teeth can cause acid formation, resulting in tooth decay. During sleep, production of saliva slows down which typically dilutes food and initiates the swallowing reflex. Therefore, the last sips of fluid that a baby takes before going to sleep remains around the teeth for a longer period of time. Breastfeeding infants to sleep may also have the same detrimental effect on their teeth. Parents could substitute bottles of water in place of milk if their babies really need a drink before bedtime.

Once the primary teeth erupt, it's important to take care of them since they provide the foundation for permanent teeth. Some pediatric dentists even recommend brushing babies' teeth as soon as the first tooth comes in. A toothbrush designed for young children should be selected. They usually have a small head with soft round bristles and are available in fun character styles. Selecting a “Barney” or “Elmo” toothbrush may get toddlers interested in brushing their teeth. Children's toothpastes are also available in special flavors such as bubble gum. However, toothpaste should not be used until children are old enough to rinse and spit out the residue. When they are ready, use only a pea size amount of fluoridated toothpaste on the toothbrush. The toothpaste should also be stored in a safe place to prevent kids from eating it since ingesting too much fluoride can be harmful.

Ideally, children should brush their teeth at least twice a day (usually after breakfast and before bedtime). Although small children should be encouraged to brush their own teeth, parents may need to finish the job for them. Most kids won't be able to adequately brush their teeth until they are about seven years old. The American Dental Association also recommends that parents begin flossing their children's teeth once all of the primary teeth come in. Yet, some dentists feel that it's acceptable to wait until kids are old enough to floss their own teeth which is a more practical approach for parents with uncooperative toddlers.

Fluoride also plays an important role in the proper formation of strong decay resistant teeth. Fluoride strengthens teeth through direct application with toothpastes, rinses, and dental treatments. Children need a small amount of fluoride in their diet in addition to the fluoride applied to the surface of the teeth. Fluoride that is ingested is taken up by the permanent teeth forming in the jaw. In areas where the drinking water does not contain enough fluoride, fluoride supplementation is recommended for children over six months old. A child's pediatrician can determine the correct amount of supplements needed. They are usually given in the form of drops or tablets along with prescribed vitamins.

Children need regular dental check-ups in addition to following a dental home care program. How old should kids be for their first trip to the dentist? There really isn't a magic age and even the medical profession can't seem to agree on this matter. The Academy of Pediatric Dentistry recommends that visits to the dentist begin between the ages of six months to one year. However, the Academy of Pediatrics maintains that oral checkups can be made by the pediatrician during the toddlers years and that the first trip to the dentist take place by age three. Parents will need to decide for themselves when their children are ready to see the dentist by taking into account each child's personality and the condition of their teeth.

Visiting the dentist for the first time can be a very scary experience for kids. Parents should try to lessen their children's anxiety by familiarizing them with the concept of the dentist beforehand. They could inquire ahead of time what their child can expect at the dentist's office and explain it to them in detail. For example, some dentists only perform an exam during the first visit and will wait to clean teeth and apply fluoride until the next appointment. X-rays are usually not taken until the

child is older unless there is a problem. Sealants are also applied to chewing surfaces later on (around age six or seven) in order to help prevent tooth decay.

It may be a good idea for parents to schedule a dental check-up for themselves prior to their children's first dental visit. They can bring their kids along and allow them to watch the dentist clean Mommy or Daddy's teeth. This will help them become familiar with the dentist's office and would hopefully make their first experience in the dentist's chair seem less strange. Parents could also make an appointment with a pediatric dentist who specializes in handling anxious children. However, some family dentists are excellent with children and may be a better choice since they can take care of the entire family. After the initial visit, children should see their dentist for a check-up at least twice a year.

One final way that parents can help their children develop healthy teeth is by limiting their intake of foods that cause cavities including candy, fruit rolls, dried fruit (raisins), cookies, and cakes. These types of foods have a high sugar and starch content which bacteria feed on in the mouth, producing an acid that wears away tooth enamel. Other foods such as cheese may actually inhibit cavity formation in addition to strengthening teeth.

Prevention is the key to ensuring the development of healthy teeth in both children and adults. Following a dental hygiene program at home and seeing the dentist for regular check-ups will help children develop good dental habits early on. It will also decrease their chances of having serious dental problems when they get older. Taking care of your kids' teeth is important since they will need to last a lifetime.

Sources:

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4. www.aapd.org/consumer.html The American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry web site.

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