

Baby Teeth 101

Q. Do baby teeth matter, since they are going to fall out anyway?

A. Yes! Baby teeth matter. Healthy baby teeth are **very important** for a baby who will soon be learning how to talk and eat solid food. As a child grows, healthy baby teeth can help ensure healthy permanent teeth and overall good health. Children are not healthy if their mouths are not healthy.

Q. When should I first have my baby's teeth checked?

A. Your baby's teeth should be screened by a dentist or physician by their first birthday – **first screening by first birthday**. Have your baby's teeth looked at during your child's well-child visits beginning when the first tooth comes in, usually between 6 and 12 months of age. Early preventive care will protect your child's oral health now and in the future.

Q. What will happen during the oral health screening?

A. Your dentist or physician should check your baby's teeth for signs of early decay, talk about daily tooth care and discuss your baby's diet and eating habits. He or she may also suggest fluoride varnish, a quick and easy way to prevent and even heal early decay, or fluoride drops or tablets if you live in an area without fluoridated water.

Q. I thought I didn't need to have my baby's teeth looked at until age three. What's changed?

A. Research shows that early preventive care, starting with the very first tooth, helps prevent dental disease and protect a child's overall health. Make sure your baby's teeth are checked by age one by a dentist or physician. Take your baby in sooner if you notice any problems. Early oral health care saves money by preventing complicated, expensive dental problems down the road.

Q. I've heard about tooth painting or varnishes. How can I learn more?

A. Ask your dentist or physician about fluoride varnish. It is a quick and effective way to help prevent and heal early tooth decay.

Q. Do I need to clean my baby's mouth if there are no teeth yet?

A. Yes, beginning at birth clean your baby's gums after every feeding with a clean, damp washcloth or piece of gauze.

Q. What do I do once teeth begin to appear?

A. Once teeth appear, brush them twice daily with a soft toothbrush and a rice-sized amount of fluoridated toothpaste. Place your baby's head in your lap to make it easier to brush.

Q. Can babies get cavities?

A. Yes. As soon as teeth appear, they are at risk for decay. It is critical to keep a baby's mouth and teeth clean and healthy. Dental problems can begin early and get worse over time. If problems are caught early, they can be treated. Prevention helps protect your child's oral and overall health.

Q. What is "baby bottle" tooth decay?

A. Babies who go to bed with a bottle of milk, formula or juice are more likely to get tooth decay. When these liquids stay in contact with the teeth while the baby is sleeping, teeth can decay quickly. If you put your baby to bed with a bottle, fill it with water. Formula, milk, juice or other liquids may increase your child's risk for cavities. Breast milk can also cause decay if your baby falls asleep while nursing.

Q. Can the condition of a parent's teeth and gums affect their child's oral health?

A. Yes, studies show that parents can pass the germs that cause dental disease to their children by licking pacifiers or pre-chewing a baby's food. Parents need to keep their teeth and gums healthy by brushing twice daily with fluoride toothpaste, flossing and having regular checkups. Parents' good oral hygiene can help prevent cavities in their baby's mouth.

Q. How does diet affect my baby's teeth?

A. A healthy diet helps children grow and develop. Sweets (candy or cookies), starchy foods (crackers), and sticky foods (raisins, fruit snacks) stay in the mouth longer and easily cause tooth decay. For snacks, offer fruits, vegetables or cheese. Limit how often your child has juice, sweet drinks and snacks. Constant snacking on starchy or sticky foods or sipping sweet liquids throughout the day can cause tooth decay.

Q. Besides cleaning and brushing my child's teeth, are there other things parents can do?

A. Yes. Check your baby's teeth often. Look for white spots on the teeth or changes to the gums. White spots, especially along the gums, are often early signs of tooth decay. If you see white or brown spots or other changes in your baby's teeth or gums when you "lift the lip," call your dentist or physician.