

Your Baby's Oral Health

It's never too soon to start caring for your baby's dental health. Healthy teeth are important for your baby's overall health. They help your baby eat, and also help form sounds and words. Proper oral care prevents tooth decay. Tooth decay is the most common chronic childhood disease, but it's preventable. It develops when a baby's gums and teeth are exposed to sugary drinks or food for a long time. Tooth decay can begin as soon as your baby's first tooth comes in.

Here are some tips to prevent tooth decay. Keep your baby's gums and teeth clean. A few days after your baby is born, start wiping their gums with a warm, damp washcloth or gauze after each feeding.

"That has sort of two purposes. One is really just to acclimate the child to the fact that mouth care is part of life, and the second is to just gently wipe away sort of the debris from the day, whether it's breast milk or formula. That continues right up through the eruption of the first tooth, which can be anywhere between four months and as late as a year."

Only fill bottles with breast milk and/or formula. Don't fill bottles with fruit juice or soft drinks. Never put your baby to bed with a bottle or food. This not only exposes your child's teeth to sugars, but it can also cause ear infections or cause your child to choke. Try not to share saliva with your baby by using the same spoon or licking a pacifier to clean it. Tooth decay can begin with bacteria being passed from the mother to the baby.

Make sure to take your baby for regular checkups. During well baby visits, your pediatrician will give you tips to keep their gums and mouth healthy. When your baby's teeth start to come in, they may be fussier than usual. Teething usually starts between four and 7 months. During teething, your baby's gums may be tender and sore.

Plastic and rubber toys are great for soothing sore gums. Teething necklaces and bracelets made of amber, wood, marble or silicone are choking hazards and should not be used. Try a cold washcloth. You can use a damp washcloth that has been twisted and frozen. But avoid teething rings that are frozen solid. These are too hard for your little one's mouth.

As soon as your child's first tooth comes in, it's time to schedule a visit to the dentist. The American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry recommends the first dental visit happen within six months after the first tooth appears, but no later than a child's first birthday. Your pediatric dentist will check the placement of your baby's teeth, how they are growing in, any discoloration, any yellowing, and signs of cavities.

"Once the first tooth comes out it's now recommended that we actually brush that tooth. So, you switch to either a finger-based toothbrush or a little infant toothbrush that's really soft with just the absolute tiniest amount of fluoride toothpaste and you cover that surface of that tooth. And then in addition to that, you sort of wipe through on the gums again all around the rest of the mouth."

These are good habits that will last a lifetime. Remember, it's important to care for your baby's oral health from the start to help keep their teeth healthy as they grow.