

Dental Health & Hygiene for Young Children



As you might guess, the number-one dental problem among preschoolers is tooth decay.

- One out of 10 two- year-olds already have one or more cavities
- By age three, 28% of children have one or more cavities
- By age five, nearly 50% of children have one or more cavities

Many parents assume that cavities in baby teeth don't matter, because they'll be lost anyway. But that's not true. Dental decay in baby teeth can negatively affect permanent teeth and lead to future dental problems.

Teaching Good Dental Habits

The best way to protect your child's teeth is to teach him good dental habits. With the proper coaching he'll quickly adopt good oral hygiene as a part of his daily routine. However, while he may be an enthusiastic participant, he won't yet have the control or concentration to brush his teeth all by himself. You'll need to supervise and help him so that the brush removes all the plaque—the soft, sticky, bacteria- containing deposits that accumulate on the teeth, causing tooth decay. Also, keep an eye out for areas of brown or white spots which might be signs of early decay.

Toothbrushing

As soon as your child has a tooth you should be helping your child brush her teeth two times a day with a smear (size of a grain of rice) of fluoride toothpaste on a child-sized toothbrush that has soft bristles. There are brushes designed to address the different needs of children at all ages, ensuring that you can select a toothbrush that is appropriate for your child.

Amount of Toothpaste

At age 3, you can start using a pea-size amount of fluoride toothpaste, which helps prevent cavities. If your child doesn't like the taste of the toothpaste, try another flavor. Also try to teach your child not to swallow it, although at this age they are often still too young to learn to rinse and spit. Swallowing too much fluoride toothpaste can make white or brown spots on your child's adult teeth.

Brushing Motion

You'll hear all kinds of advice on whether the best brushing motion is up and down, back and forth, or around in circles. The truth is that the direction really doesn't matter. What's important is to clean each tooth thoroughly, top and bottom, inside and out. This is where you'll encounter resistance from your child, who probably will concentrate on only the front teeth that he can see. It may help to turn it into a game of "find the hidden teeth." Incidentally, a child cannot brush his teeth without help until he's older—about six to eight years old. So be sure to supervise or do the actual brushing if necessary.

Too Much Sugar

Besides regular toothbrushing with the right amount of fluoride toothpaste, your child's diet will play a key role in his dental health. And, of course, sugar is the big villain. The longer and more frequently his teeth are exposed to sugar, the greater the risk of cavities. **"Sticky sugar" foods such as sticky caramel, toffee, gum, and dried fruit—particularly when it stays in his mouth and bathes his teeth in sugar for hours—could do serious damage.** Make sure to always brush your child's teeth after a sugary food item. In addition, do not allow your child to have any sugar-containing liquid in a sippy cup for a prolonged period.

Dental Checkups

During regular well-child visits, the pediatrician will check your child's teeth and gums to ensure their health. If she notices problems, she may refer your child to a pediatric dentist (pedodontist) or a general dentist with an interest in treating the dental needs of children. **Both the American Academy of Pediatrics and the American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry recommend that all children see a pediatric dentist and establish a "dental home" by age one.**

As part of her dental checkup the dentist will make sure all teeth are developing normally and that there are no dental problems and give you further advice on proper hygiene. She also may apply a topical fluoride solution to provide extra protection against cavities. If you live in an area where the water is not fluoridated, she may prescribe fluoride drops or chewable tablets for your toddler. For more guidance on fluoride supplements, talk to your pediatrician.

Tips to Help Young Children Practice Brushing & Make It A Good Experience:

- **Choosing a toothbrush.** Use a soft-bristled toothbrush designed for brushing an infant's or child's teeth.
- **Holding a toothbrush.** If the child has trouble holding a toothbrush, the toothbrush handle can be strapped to the child's hand with a wide rubber band, a hair band, or Velcro. Toothbrushes with thick handles can also be found in retail and discount stores.
- **Teaching the child how to brush.** Break the process into small steps that the child can understand and practice. Ask a dentist, dental hygienist, occupational therapist, or early childhood specialist for help, if needed. Another way is to place a hand over the child's hand to guide the toothbrush as the child brushes.
- **Using toothpaste with fluoride.** Use toothpaste with fluoride that the child likes and that feels good in his or her mouth. An adult should always place toothpaste on the toothbrush.
 - **For children under age 3:** Use a small smear of fluoride toothpaste (or an amount about the size of a grain of rice).
 - **For children ages 3–6:** Use a pea-size amount of fluoride toothpaste.
 - **If a child cannot spit:** Have the child tilt his or her mouth down so that the toothpaste can dribble out into the sink, a cup, or a washcloth. Since the fluoride in toothpaste is clearly meant to be swishes but not swallowed, make sure to help or watch the child while brushing. When she is old enough, tell her to spit out the toothpaste after brushing.
- **Positioning the child.** There are many ways a child can be positioned to make the child feel comfortable and allow an adult to brush his or her teeth.
- **Keeping the child engaged in brushing.** Use a timer, a short song, or counting as a game to encourage brushing for 2 minutes.