

Dental care for your infant and toddler

Beginning dental care early is important for your child's health. Dental care keeps teeth healthy for a lifetime. Healthy baby teeth help children eat and speak clearly and baby teeth also guide permanent adult teeth into the proper position.

What is early childhood tooth decay (cavities)?

Early childhood tooth decay refers to the development of cavities in children from 6 months to 6 years of age. Once your child has teeth, they are at risk for tooth decay. Many things cause tooth decay, including the bacteria that is normally found in the mouth. Without treatment, decay can spread deeper into the tooth. Decay can cause pain and infection and can even damage the underlying adult tooth. The baby tooth or teeth may need to be removed. Some baby teeth are not replaced by permanent teeth until the age of 12 or 13.

What can contribute to tooth decay?

The following factors may contribute to early childhood tooth decay:

- Frequent eating (especially sticky or sugary foods)
- Constant use of a baby bottle or sippy cup filled with milk, juice or formula (especially at bedtime)
- Not brushing your child's teeth daily
- Not using fluoride toothpaste

According to the Canadian Dental Association, the damage that sugar does to teeth depends on how much sugar goes into the mouth and how long it stays in the mouth. When your child eats or drinks sugars, the germs (bacteria) in your child's mouth mix with the sugars to make a mild acid. This acid attacks the hard outer layer of teeth (also called enamel) to form cavities.

If your child often sips juice or eats sticky or sugary snacks between meals, the teeth are repeatedly coated in sugars. Tooth decay can also develop when a child goes to bed with a bottle of milk or juice. The liquid stays in the mouth, bathing the teeth in sugar over a long period.

Transferring bacteria from your mouth to your baby's

Your child can get bacteria from family members through the saliva. To reduce the chance of cavity-causing bacteria passing to your baby:

- Avoid sharing toothbrushes
- Avoid licking soothers to clean them
- Avoid feeding your baby with a spoon that has been in your mouth
- Make sure all family members have healthy mouths

Bacteria, combined with poor dental hygiene and unhealthy eating habits, can increase the risk of your child developing early childhood cavities.

How to prevent tooth decay?

Practice good dental care

Good dental care includes cleaning and checking your child's teeth and mouth every day. Lift the lip so you can see along the gum line when cleaning. Look for white or brown areas, which may be early signs of tooth decay.

Dental care includes cleaning your baby's gums even before the teeth come into the mouth. Gently wipe your baby's gums with a clean, wet face cloth. When teeth start to come in, use a small soft-bristled toothbrush with a smear (size of a grain of rice) of fluoride toothpaste. Brush your child's teeth in the morning and especially at bedtime. Once your child turns 3, brush your child's teeth using a pea-sized amount of fluoride toothpaste on a soft child's toothbrush. Fluoride toothpaste used in these amounts is considered safe and effective against tooth decay.

Offer water to drink between feedings

Introduce your baby to using a lidless cup between 6 and 9 months of age. After 12 months, water is the best choice between regular feeding times and for thirst.

Give up the bottle or sippy cup at bedtime

For tips on how to help your child give up a bottle or sippy cup at bedtime, visit the Canadian Dental Association – Early childhood tooth decay at

www.cda-adc.ca/en/oral_health/cfyt/dental_care_children/tooth_decay.asp.

When will my child get teeth?

Children have their own schedule for teething. Most children begin teething at about 6 months of age. Your child should have all their first set of teeth, or “baby” teeth, by 3 years of age. The bottom front teeth usually appear first, followed by the top front teeth. In total, 20 teeth should appear: 10 in the top jaw and 10 in the bottom jaw.

For more information about when teeth come in, visit the Canadian Dental Association - Dental Development: www.cda-adc.ca/en/oral_health/cfyt/dental_care_children/development.asp.

How can I comfort my teething baby?

Teething may cause some discomfort, making your baby fussy. Your baby may feel better if allowed to chew on a clean, chilled teething ring, teething toy or clean wet face cloth. Teething cookies or biscuits are not a good choice because these can stick to your baby's teeth and cause tooth decay.

Teething does not cause fevers. If your baby has a fever or diarrhea while teething, treat it as you would at any other time. If you have questions or concerns about your baby's fever or diarrhea, call **8-1-1** to speak with a registered nurse or contact your health care provider.

What about soothers or pacifiers?

Soothers or pacifiers are sometimes given to babies during rest, sleep or other times. If you choose to give your baby a soother, here are a few tips:

- Ensure that breastfeeding is well established
- Choose the right size soother for your baby's mouth
- Check the soother nipple often. Throw it away if it's sticky, cracked or torn
- Keep the soother clean
- Do not dip soother in any sweet substance
- Do not dip soother in honey as it may cause serious health issues in babies under the age of one
- By age 1 or 2, if your child is using a soother, limit use to nap time or bedtime

Do not use soothers or pacifiers once all baby teeth have grown in, usually when your child is about 3 years old. Regular soother use after 3 years of age may affect your child's speech development and teeth positioning.

Can fluoride help stop tooth decay?

The Canadian Dental and Medical Associations and the dental professionals of British Columbia recommend fluoride for preventing tooth decay for people of all ages.

Fluoride is a proven, effective and low-cost way to prevent cavities. Using the recommended amount of fluoride toothpaste twice a day helps make tooth enamel stronger and better able to resist tooth decay. The amount of fluoride in toothpaste can vary by brand and type. Always check the label.

Your dentist or dental professional may also apply fluoride at regular dental visits.

In B.C., there is little natural fluoride, and some cities add fluoride to the drinking water. If you are unsure if your water supply contains fluoride, call your local public health unit. For more information on water fluoridation, visit [HealthLinkBC File #28 Water fluoridation facts](#).

When should my child go to the dentist?

The Canadian Dental Association recommends regular dental visits starting 6 months after your child's first tooth appears or when they are about one year old. Your child's first dental visit is a good time to discuss daily dental care, fluoride and eating habits.

For more information

Children in families who receive income assistance can apply for MSP supplementary benefits to receive basic dental care through the Healthy Kids Program. For more information, call 1-866-866-0800 or visit Basic dental, eyeglasses and hearing care on the Government of British Columbia website www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/health/managing-your-health/family/child-teen-health/dental-eyeglasses.

For more information on dental care, please contact the dental program at your public health unit, your dentist or dental hygienist.

For more HealthLinkBC File topics, visit www.HealthLinkBC.ca/health-library/healthlinkbc-files or your local public health unit. For non-emergency health information and advice in B.C. visit www.HealthLinkBC.ca or call **8-1-1** (toll-free). For the deaf and hard of hearing, call **7-1-1**. Translation services are available in more than 130 languages on request.