

Caring for Baby Teeth in the Early Years

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Starting oral health practices at an early age, like brushing and flossing teeth, can help children build good habits. It is important to take care of your child's gums and teeth before and after their teeth come in, or erupt. This will set them up for better adult oral health.

Teething for infants and toddlers

For most children, baby teeth start to erupt around 6 to 12 months of age. But all children are different. The first teeth to erupt are usually the teeth in the front and center of the mouth. This includes two teeth on the bottom and two on top. By the time a toddler is 3 years old, they should have a full set of 20 baby teeth.

Teething can be uncomfortable. Some signs that your baby may be teething are an increased amount of drool, irritability, and less sleep. Your baby may also have a loss of appetite, fussiness, or want to chew on things. There are several options to help soothe some of the discomfort that might come with teething. You can gently rub your baby's gum with a clean finger; a small, cool spoon; or moist gauze pad. Giving your baby something to chew on can also be soothing. Clean, solid rubber teethers



without any liquid inside are the best option. It is not recommended to use numbing gels or tablets as they can be harmful. Always discuss with your health-care provider before giving your baby pain medicine.

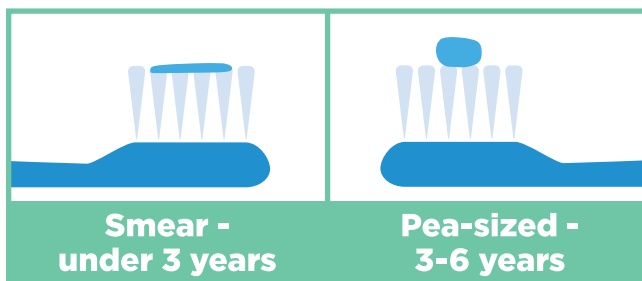
How to care for baby teeth and gums

Oral care begins before you even see baby teeth. Wipe your baby's gums daily with a clean, damp washcloth or gauze. When your child's first tooth appears, gently but thoroughly brush their teeth, in the morning and night, for two minutes each.

Once enough teeth come in that they begin to touch, clean or floss between the child's teeth daily. The parent should be in charge of tooth brushing and flossing until the child is approximately 8 years old. The American Dental Association recommends that you schedule a dentist appointment for your child within 6 months of their first tooth appearing or no later than their first birthday.

Fluoride is helpful for the prevention of tooth decay because it hardens the tooth and prevents acid from breaking it down. In appropriate amounts, fluoride is safe for your child. Fluoride is in many toothpastes. Many communities also add small amounts of fluoride to tap water to help prevent dental caries, or cavities. Bottled water and ground water have variable levels of fluoride. The amount may differ depending on the source. Most bottled waters do not have fluoride added.

Before age 3, use a small amount of fluoride toothpaste (not training toothpaste) no larger than a grain of rice. At age 3 and when they have learned to spit properly, use a pea-sized amount of fluoride toothpaste.



Feeding practices to support oral health: Baby bottles and what you put in them

What babies drink and how they are fed is an important part of oral health. Proper oral health practices help keep the outer layer of teeth, known as enamel, healthy. Tooth decay, which is the breakdown of enamel on teeth, can happen as soon as the first tooth appears.



An early sign of tooth decay in children is chalky white spots on the teeth near the gumline. Later signs show up as darker brown spots that indicate cavity formation. If you notice any of these signs, contact your dentist for an appointment.

Follow these practices to help avoid tooth decay:

- For the first year of life, human milk and/or iron-fortified infant formula provide the fluid a baby needs. You can offer small amounts of plain tap or filtered water starting around 6 months of age.
- Avoid filling baby bottles with sugary drinks like juice, sugar water, or soda.
- Fruit juice can lead to tooth decay. When you can, choose fresh, frozen, and canned fruits instead of fruit juice. If you choose to serve fruit juice, wait until children are at least 12 months old, choose 100% fruit juice, and limit to no more than half a cup per day.
- Do not put babies to bed with a bottle. Let your child finish their bottle before putting them to bed or down to nap. Clean baby's teeth before putting them to bed at night.
- If your baby uses a pacifier, do not dip it in sugar, honey, or other sugary substances.
- Try not to share saliva with your child through licking the pacifier or feeding spoon.

Feeding practices to support oral health: Baby bottle to cup

To help prevent tooth decay, it is important to transition your child from using a bottle to a cup by the time they are 1 year old. Bottle drinking, especially when putting a child to bed with a bottle, allows liquid to stay on the tooth enamel for a long time. This can lead to tooth decay. Training cups, also known as sippy cups, are often used as a transition from bottle to an open cup. Use these when the child is sitting upright. While helpful in avoiding spills, sippy cups do not help your child learn the process of eating and drinking and are linked with an increased risk of cavities.

Drinking from an open cup or using a straw supports your child’s swallow development. Using a sippy cup often and for prolonged periods may

disrupt how your child rests their tongue, the direction and placement of teeth as they come in, and their facial features. When you can, help your child drink from an open cup or help them learn to drink from a straw.

Feeding practices to support oral health: Solid food introduction and beyond

You can introduce solid foods around 4 to 6 months of age and when your child shows signs that they are ready. Many first foods include pureed fruits and vegetables or soft mashed foods. These foods are complementary to an infant’s diet of formula or human milk. As their diet expands to include more foods, prioritize fresh fruits, vegetables, whole grains, plant and lean animal sources of protein, and dairy that support oral health and overall health.

Table 1 – Important nutrients for oral health:

Nutrient	Benefits	Food examples
Vitamin C	Important for healthy gums and quick healing of wounds	Fruits and vegetables: Strawberries, blueberries, oranges, kiwi, green peppers, potatoes
Vitamin A	Helps build the outer layer of the tooth	Orange vegetables, tomatoes, spinach, lettuce, broccoli, cantaloupe
Water and Fiber	Help to clean teeth and produce saliva	Fruits and vegetables
Calcium	Promotes growth and development of baby’s bones and teeth	Dairy, broccoli, kale, fortified juices and cereals
Phosphorus	Protects and rebuilds the outer layer of the tooth	Meat, poultry, fish, milk, and eggs

Sources: American Dental Association. (n.d.). Good nutrition during pregnancy protects your dental health (and your baby’s). MouthHealthy. <https://www.mouthhealthy.org/life-stages/pregnancy/nutrition-pregnancy> and American Dental Association. (n.d.). Food tips. MouthHealthy. <https://www.mouthhealthy.org/nutrition/food-tips>

Other considerations for children's diets include:

- Avoid sugary food and beverages like soda, candy, and baked goods that can lead to tooth decay.
- Limit high-fat and processed food such as fried food and food products with too much salt and sugar like packaged sweets, snacks, and some frozen meals.
- Look at food labels to check for Added Sugars. Children under 2 years old should not eat foods with added sugar. However, many food products have added sugar. Try to select foods like plain yogurt or unsweetened cereals that have little or no added sugar.
- After 12 months, children can drink whole milk until they are 2 years old when they can transition to reduced-fat milk.
- Serve tap or filtered water or milk at mealtimes. If your toddler is thirsty between meals, offer tap or filtered water in a cup.
- Clean, community tap water that contains fluoride is suggested to promote the health of baby teeth.

Caring for your baby's teeth begins before you can see them. Oral health practices, which include cleaning teeth and gums, are important from the beginning. To further support oral health, limit added sugar. Give kids a balanced diet of whole fruit, vegetables, whole grains, dairy, and plant and lean sources of animal protein that include vitamins and minerals that help teeth health.

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