

Caring for Tiny Teeth

February is National Children's Dental Health Month. Did you know that tooth decay is the most common chronic disease in children? It affects 25 percent of U.S. children ages 6 to 11 — and less than 2 percent of 1 year olds have visited the dentist. Read on to learn more about why it's important for children of all ages to receive oral health care, and how you can help protect your child's teeth from decay and other problems.

What is tooth decay?

Tooth decay is the destruction of the hard, outer layer of your teeth (the enamel), which can affect people of all ages — including children and even infants. The type of decay seen in young children and infants is commonly called "baby bottle tooth decay." It's important to be aware of and help prevent childhood tooth decay, because it can negatively affect your child's self-esteem, social development, and overall quality of life.

What causes decay, and how can it be prevented?

Consuming too many sugary drinks and snacks can cause tooth decay. It's important for you as a parent to limit the amount of sugary beverages your child drinks to avoid prolonged exposure of the liquid to teeth. These beverages include soft drinks or sweetened fruit juice. If you give your child a sippy cup for long periods of time, fill it only with water, and don't allow him or her to take it to bed. When your child begins eating solid foods, you should limit the amount of sugary or starchy snacks — especially food that can get stuck on or between teeth. Your children should avoid, or sparingly consume, cookies, cakes, candy, and gum.

When should my child see the dentist?

The ideal time for a first dental visit is six months after your child's first tooth erupts, or by his or her first birthday. After the first visit, your child should see the dentist every six months. Early visits will help familiarize him or her with the dental office, reducing anxiety and making future visits less stressful. In addition to examining your child's mouth, the dentist also can teach you how to help care for his or her teeth at home.

How can I protect my child's oral health at home?

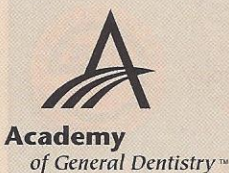
As a parent, you are responsible for maintaining your child's oral hygiene at home until he or she is old enough to take



responsibility for brushing and flossing. To properly care for your child's teeth, follow these tips:

- Clean your infant's gums with a clean, damp cloth after each feeding.
- Monitor excessive sucking of pacifiers, fingers, and thumbs to avoid teeth misalignment.
- Encourage your child to drink tap or fountain water. If you buy bottled water, make sure that it is fluoridated. Fluoride makes the entire tooth structure more resistant to decay and promotes remineralization.
- As soon as your child's first teeth come in, begin brushing them with a small, soft-bristled toothbrush and water. If you are considering using toothpaste before your child's second birthday, be sure to first ask your dentist.
- When your child is old enough, encourage him or her to brush to build self-confidence. Always monitor your child's brushing technique and thoroughness.

Remember: The best way to teach your child how to brush is to lead by example. Allow your child to watch you brush your teeth to promote good oral hygiene. Talk with your dentist for more information about how to care for your child's teeth.



KnowYourTeeth.com

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