



Protect those baby pearly-whites

WHEN YOUR CHILD WAS BORN, YOU PROBABLY counted her fingers and toes, but did you think about a beautiful set of teeth growing just beneath the surface of your baby's gums? Considering oral health, even before teeth emerge, is an important way to safe guard your child's overall health. Healthy teeth are essential for good nutrition, proper language development and an attractive appearance. No matter what age your child is, it's time to begin or maintain healthy dental habits.

Birth to 6 months

Begin cleaning your baby's mouth soon after birth. Use a soft, clean washcloth to wipe his gums after feedings. Starting early will help your baby accept brushing later when his teeth emerge. Milk, including breast milk, has sugars that can irritate gums and later erode teeth. Once your baby begins solid foods, it's important to wipe or brush after meals. Never put your baby to bed with a bottle that contains formula, milk (including breast milk), or juice. Anything but water in a nighttime bottle can quickly erode teeth and cause decay, even if teeth are only emerging.

6 months to 1 year

As soon as your baby's teeth appear, begin brushing with a small, soft toothbrush and water. Your baby's system is not ready to handle toothpaste. Check teeth monthly for changes. Beginning cavities look like white spots or streaks on your baby's teeth. Take your child to the dentist for a first visit after her first tooth emerges but before she is 1 year old.

Toddlers and 2-year-olds

Brush teeth at least twice daily, using a soft brush. It's especially important to brush before bed. Use a small amount of toothpaste, about the size of a pea, after your child has learned to spit. Dentists recommend that children not swallow toothpaste. Floss gently when two teeth touch. Toddlers are anxious to do things themselves and you can encourage your child to brush his own teeth. But at this age dad or mom needs to take a turn to be sure the job is done completely. Continue regular dental visits.



Preschoolers

By the time children enter preschool most have all of their primary teeth. Unfortunately, some will also have cavities. Avoid the pain and inconvenience of dental work by making sure your child brushes at least twice a day and especially at bedtime. Your preschooler will become better at brushing her own teeth, and can take more responsibility to do so. Continue to check daily that she is brushing and flossing well. Those regular dental appointments continue to be important.

At any age

See that your child eats a balanced diet with adequate calcium and minerals for healthy strong teeth. Make sweets an occasional treat, avoid soft drinks and have your child brush after sugary snacks. Your city water supply probably contains fluoride that helps prevent cavities. When you serve your child bottled water, he may miss out on this important treatment.

Finally, become your child's best teacher for good dental habits by brushing and flossing your teeth daily, and getting regular dental care. When you look in the mirror you'll see a family of bright smiles looking back. ❖