

# Oral Health for Children – A Parent's Guide

Teeth are an integral part of overall health and with proper care people can keep their teeth for a lifetime.

Good oral health should begin early – even before a child's first teeth erupt. Baby teeth generally start to peek through the gums at six months of age. Besides allowing a child to eat and speak, baby teeth "hold the space" for adult teeth that will develop later. Parents play an important role in caring for their children's mouths and helping them develop good oral cleaning habits. The first visit to the dental hygienist is recommended before the child turns one, and then regular visits should be scheduled.

## TEETHING AND NEW TEETH

Primary (or baby) teeth and their care are important for the health of all children so they can eat and speak properly. Healthy baby teeth will contribute to healthy adult teeth and good oral health throughout life.

- Teething is the natural process of the baby teeth working their way through the gums.
- The first teeth erupt at approximately six months of age and continue over the next three years.
- In most cases teething causes minor discomfort and may be obvious by drooling, crankiness and irritable disposition.
- Normal signs of teething also include red cheeks, red swollen gums and the need for an infant to chew on things.
- Fever, stuffiness, diarrhea and runny nose should not be blamed on teething. A child with these conditions may require medical attention.
- Giving the baby a cold washcloth or teething ring to chew as well as massaging the areas of discomfort with a clean finger may provide relief.
- Avoid using over-the-counter tooth gels unless recommended by a medical or dental professional.

## PROFESSIONAL CARE AND TREATMENT

The initial dental visit is recommended before the child's first birthday. At this time the child can ride in the chair and count the teeth in order to become familiar with the dental office environment. It also provides an opportunity for parents to learn more about their children's oral health and how to help them brush and floss at home. After the first visit, regular dental hygiene appointments are

important to help prevent dental disease and to monitor tooth development. The frequency and duration of appointments will depend on the child's age and needs.

- Subsequent dental appointments will include an examination of teeth and gums.
- In some cases teeth may need to be cleaned (scaled) to remove built-up plaque (bacteria) and hardened plaque (calculus).
- If teeth are stained they may be polished.
- Fluoride treatments will depend on the child's risk for cavities.
- Dental hygienists will provide home care suggestions on brushing, oral care products and proper nutrition.
- Discuss any concerns or changes in the condition of a child's mouth (e.g., chipped tooth, discolouration, bleeding gums, pain) with a dental professional.



## CAVITIES: CAUSES AND RISKS

Children can suffer from oral infections and early childhood cavities (ECC). ECC is a severe form of tooth decay in the primary teeth of infants and toddlers. It affects more than 10 per cent of preschool-age children in Canada. ECC can be caused by passing bacteria from the parent/caregiver to the child (e.g., through kisses, sharing toothbrushes, food and utensils), the amount of sugar and starches in the diet, and the time and frequency of feedings. Toddlers who have ECC tend to remain high risk and often develop cavities in their adult teeth.

It is important to remove plaque – a sticky, white film of bacteria that adheres to the teeth. If left on the teeth it can cause tooth decay.

## PREVENTION AND TIPS

Tooth decay today is largely preventable by the daily removal of plaque and by controlling the amount of sugar and starches in the diet, such as candy, dried fruit, beverages with sugar, sports drinks, cookies and cakes.

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## Tips for healthy nutrition

Healthy nutritious snacks are good for the teeth, gums and general health. A variety of snacks and drinks low in sugar and high in nutrition are best. Depending on the child's age, some suggestions include:

- Bagel with peanut butter, cheese, tuna or salmon salad
- Yogurt
- Vegetables and dip
- Cottage cheese and fruit
- Egg roll, samosa, bean burrito
- Hard-boiled egg
- Popcorn sprinkled with Parmesan cheese
- Cold pizza slices
- Whole grain crackers topped with nut butter, cheese, hummus or baba ghanouj
- Water to quench thirst between meals. Limit consumption of fruit juices.



## Tips for home care

### Infants and toddlers (newborn to three years)

- Avoid giving children milk or juice in their bottle at naptime or bedtime. This can lead to decay, especially in the front teeth. Instead, try a bottle of water or no bottle at all.
- After every feeding gently clean gums and newly erupted teeth with clean gauze or face cloth.
- Soothers are a better alternative to thumb sucking. Be sure to use a soother that has an orthodontic design and is made of a non-toxic material with a solid construction so they cannot be pulled apart.
- Never give children sweetened pacifiers.
- Do not dip a soother into corn syrup, sugar, honey or sweeteners, as this will cause teeth to decay. A parent or caregiver should never clean a soother by putting it in their mouth. Any oral bacteria can be passed on to the child.
- Rinse the child's mouth after giving any medication, as it is usually sweetened for taste.
- When checking or cleaning the baby's mouth, the child's head should be positioned on the parent's lap. This will help stabilize the head and provide easy access.
- Check for decay once a month by lifting the baby's

top lip to see the front and back of all teeth. If there are any white or brown spots, consult a dental professional.

- As soon as teeth appear, brush twice a day using a small soft-bristled toothbrush with water or fluoride-free toothpaste.
- Early exposure to fluoride in water will help strengthen bones and teeth.
- Swallowing too much fluoride (e.g., eating toothpaste or consuming supplements) can cause fluorosis, the presence of white spots, brown mottling or streaking on the permanent teeth.
- Brushing before bed is most important to remove plaque that causes cavities.
- Use only a pea-size (or smaller) amount of fluoride-free toothpaste.
- Begin flossing once a day when most of the baby teeth are in, or when molars are touching. The child's head can rest on the parent's lap for stability and access.

### Ages three to six

- At this stage parents still need to supervise and help children brush and floss properly. The parent can check after the child has brushed.
- The best way to check the child's mouth after brushing is to stand behind the child so that both are facing the mirror. Lift the lip to assess the gums and the back teeth.
- Toothpaste with fluoride should only be used when the child can rinse and spit properly.
- Swallowing toothpaste with fluoride can permanently stain a child's adult teeth. Use only a small amount of toothpaste (pea-size or smaller).
- Encourage regular brushing and flossing as the child gets older. Consider a reward system for good brushing and flossing. One idea is a sticker chart that offers a tangible prize, such as a special toy or trip to the zoo, for a predetermined number of stickers.

### Age seven or eight

- The shedding of baby teeth occurs between the ages of six and 12.
- By age seven or eight, most children can adequately brush their own teeth. However, adult supervision is still recommended.

*As professional health-care providers, dental hygienists are primarily concerned with promoting good oral health. Dental hygiene is among the largest of the regulated healthcare professions in the province. In Ontario all dental hygienists are registered with the College of Dental Hygienists of Ontario, which regulates the profession to ensure the public receives safe and ongoing comprehensive oral care.*

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