

Want Some Life Saving Advice?

Ask Your Dental Hygienist About Proper Oral Health Care for Children

Dental decay (cavities) is the most common chronic disease of childhood, affecting 50 percent of children by middle childhood and nearly 70 percent by late adolescence.¹

Chronic gingivitis is also common among children. The mildest form of periodontal disease, gingivitis is often caused by inadequate oral hygiene which leads to plaque buildup.

Fortunately, most oral diseases can be prevented.

The best way to ensure that your child does not get cavities or periodontal disease is to instill proper oral habits early. Good oral hygiene routines should be established as early as infancy and continued throughout life. Dental hygienists are valuable resources in promoting, establishing, and maintaining oral health in infants, children, and adolescents.

The First Years

Oral health care is a job that begins even before a child gets his or her first tooth. You can help your child get a head start on having a healthy mouth and smile by wiping your infant's gums with a damp washcloth or gauze pad after each feeding to remove plaque and food residue.

Also, parents should clean the infant's baby teeth as soon as they come in with a soft cloth or baby toothbrush and a pea-sized amount of fluoridated toothpaste.

You should also avoid putting your child to bed with a bottle, unless it's filled only with water. Baby bottle tooth decay occurs when children fall asleep with a bottle of milk, formula, juice, or other sweet liquid in their mouths. It can also develop when children fall asleep while breast-feeding. The sugars from these liquids are left lingering on the child's teeth. Using these sugars as food, the bacteria in the mouth produce acids that attack the teeth, causing decay.

A child's first oral health visit should come around his or her first

birthday (or six months after the first tooth erupts). Your oral health professional will check for cavities in the primary teeth and watch for developmental problems. Eruption patterns can vary; often teeth will erupt early or may be delayed.

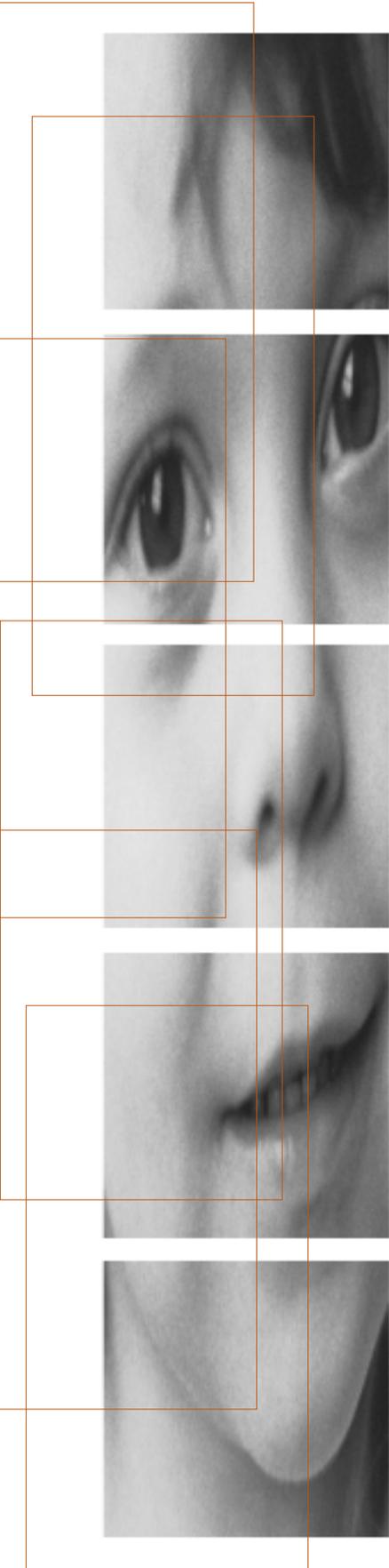
Toddler Teeth

At age two or three you can begin to teach your child proper brushing and flossing techniques. But remember, you will need to monitor brushing and flossing until age seven or eight, when the child has the dexterity to do it alone. Often there are natural spaces between the primary teeth to hold the place for the permanent teeth. If spaces are present, you do not need to begin flossing until the teeth touch. (This may occur in the molar areas first and you should floss your child's teeth until he or she is six or seven years old or until he/she can tie his/her own shoelaces). Then you should monitor their techniques and consistency.

Preparing a Child for an Oral Checkup

The dental office might seem like a frightening place to most children, but with the help of the following tips, both children and parents can enjoy the trip to the dental hygienist and dentist.

- Schedule visits to the dental hygienist at a time when your child is likely to be well rested and cooperative.
- Never mention the words "hurt" or "pain" around your child when discussing an oral health visit. Saying "it won't hurt" instills the possibility of pain into your child's thought process.
- Do not discuss your own negative experiences in your child's hearing range.
- Allow and encourage your child to discuss any fear he or she might have about oral health visits.



Older Children and Oral Health

When a child's permanent molars come in (usually around ages six and 12) parents should consider having sealants applied. Sealants are thin protective plastic coatings placed on the chewing surfaces of back teeth. Research has shown that using sealants can reduce pit and fissure surfaces in back teeth by more than 60 percent.²

If your child has braces, be sure to check out special orthodontic toothbrushes, floss threaders, and other interdental appliances to help keep spaces between teeth and arch wires clean. Orthodontic appliances (retainers) also require daily care. You should soak the appliance in a denture-cleansing bath but make sure to rinse thoroughly before reinserting it into the mouth. Gum health is essential throughout the time your child wears orthodontic appliances. Your child may need to be seen by the dental hygienist on a more frequent interval to monitor the health of the gums.

One of the best ways to protect your child's smile is by practicing prevention. Mouth guards should be worn for all contact sports, sports that involve a ball and any extreme sports like skateboarding or rollerblading. In the event that there is injury to the mouth, call your dentist immediately. If a permanent tooth is involved in the accident and comes out of the mouth, push it back into the area or place it in milk and go to the dental office. If it is a primary tooth, it is important that you not reimplant the tooth.

Smile Savers

Some oral health practices should begin from day one and continue through the teenage years.

You should change your child's toothbrush three to four times a year, and after every illness to avoid bacteria and germs.

You also should limit the amount of sugar children can eat by encouraging them to eat fruits and

vegetables for snacks instead of candies and cookies. Also, limit snacking between meals, and make sure they brush afterward.

Check to see if the water supply that serves your home is fluoridated. Your dental hygienist can offer supplemental options if it isn't.

Set a good example for your child by brushing, flossing, and eating healthy foods, and scheduling regular oral health visits for yourself. And finally, continually remind your child about the benefits of good oral health and stress the role that nutrition plays in maintaining it.

For more information about proper oral health care, as well as brushing-and-flossing instructions, please talk to your registered dental hygienist, visit the ADHA Web site, at www.adha.org.

1. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Fact Sheet: Key Findings from NHANES 1999-2002. Updated Nov. 18, 2005.

2. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Fact Sheet: Preventing Dental Caries with Community Programs. Updated August 16, 2005.

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