



Oral Health Tips for Parents and Children

Did you know that tooth decay is preventable? Most children get the germs that cause cavities before they turn two years old, so it is important to focus on their oral health right from the start.

Healthy teeth help children to grow, eat, play, and learn. Keeping the mouth healthy is important to keeping the whole body in good health.

The way that most children first get the germs that cause cavities is through sharing saliva with their caregiver, usually their mother. Saliva-sharing activities include sharing utensils, wiping off baby's pacifier in mom's mouth, testing food with the same spoons when feeding infants, among others.

It's important to keep caregivers and the whole family in good oral health by eating healthy foods, maintaining good oral hygiene, visiting the dentist for check-ups, and limiting how much and how often sugar is consumed throughout the day, to help keep the germs that cause cavities from becoming out of balance.

Below are some tips on easy behaviors that you can do, to promote good oral health for your family:

1. **Try not to share saliva with your baby**, to keep them from getting the germs that cause cavities, especially if you have had problems with cavities yourself. This is important because the earlier a child picks up this bacteria, the more cavities they may have and the earlier they may begin.
2. **Schedule your child's first dental visit when their first tooth comes in**, or by their first birthday. This visit will help you learn more about preventing cavities, about your child's own unique risk for cavities, and about other behaviors that will keep your child's mouth healthy. It might seem like one year is early to visit the dentist, but it's important to keep baby teeth healthy, because cavities in baby teeth can lead to cavities in permanent teeth, and baby teeth fill the important role of helping children talk and grow. They also hold space for the permanent teeth to come in.
3. It is as important to **limit the number of times your child has sugar** and carbohydrates each day, as it is to limit *how much* sugar they eat. When your child eats sweets, make sure

she eats them at the same time as a meal, and not on their own. It's easier for the mouth to bring itself back to a healthy balance after eating when foods are eaten at once, instead of throughout the day. Also, sipping soda or other sugary drinks all day is more harmful than having the full serving at once. Also be sure to never put anything other than water in a baby bottle at bedtime.

4. Fluoride helps to balance out the harmful effects of sugar on the teeth and mouth, and it also strengthens teeth. **Make sure your child gets the right amount of fluoride-** through your community water supply, by using toothpaste with fluoride, and/or asking your dentist about fluoride varnishes and rinses.

5. Before baby teeth come in, **wipe down the gums with a soft washcloth** or piece of gauze after feeding. When your child's first tooth comes in, begin to clean her teeth with a damp cloth or with a soft infant toothbrush. For children younger than two years old, use just a smear of fluoridated toothpaste, and use a pea-sized amount for children over two.

6. **Use cheese to help keep your child's mouth healthy.** Did you know that cheese helps to fight cavities through stimulating saliva, helping to protect teeth from harmful acids? Cheddar, Mozzarella, Swiss, and Monterey Jack can stop cavities from developing, especially if your child eats them as a snack or at the end of a meal.

The good news about dental caries, and the cavities it leads to, is that it is easily preventable, and manageable from home. Adopting these easy behaviors and making sure that your child visits the dentist regularly will help her maintain good oral health, and keep her from needing costly treatment later on.

For more information on ways to keep your child's teeth healthy, visit the American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry's (AAPD) Parent Resource Center, at <http://www.aapd.org/parents/>.

To find a pediatric dentist near you, you can also visit AAPD's pediatric dentist registry at <http://www.aapd.org/finddentist/>.

This fact sheet is disseminated by the *Improving Perinatal and Infant Oral Health Project*, a joint effort of the American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry and the Children's Dental Health Project. The AAPD is the membership organization representing the specialty of pediatric dentistry. AAPD advocates policies, guidelines, and programs that promote optimal oral health and oral health care for children. Children's Dental Health Project (CDHP) is a national non-profit organization with the vision of achieving equity in children's oral health. CDHP works to eliminate barriers to preventing dental disease to ensure that all children reach their full potential. For more information, please visit www.cdhp.org, or contact:

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