

EARLY CHILDHOOD TOOTH DECAY

Early childhood tooth decay is decay in the teeth of children from birth through to 5 years of age. The disease is considered severe when the decay is extensive on one or more teeth. Once your child has teeth, he or she is at risk for tooth decay.

CAUSES OF EARLY CHILDHOOD TOOTH DECAY

When sugars found in milk (including breast milk), formula and juice mix with the bacteria in your child's mouth, a mild acid is produced. This acid attacks the hard outer layer of your child's teeth (called the enamel). Over time, the enamel gets soft and cavities can form.

The good news is that the saliva in our mouth can help protect our teeth from this damaging acid. During a meal, your child's mouth produces a great deal of saliva. This saliva protects the teeth by neutralizing the acids produced by sugars.

The bad news is that our swallowing and saliva production slow down when we fall asleep. If your child falls asleep with milk, breast milk, juice, formula or any drink other than water in the mouth it will pool around the teeth. Over time, this may cause tooth decay.

YOU AND YOUR CHILD'S DENTIST ARE PARTNERS IN KEEPING YOUR CHILD'S TEETH AND GUMS HEALTHY FOR LIFE.

Our saliva production also slows down between meals. If your child drinks freely throughout the day from a bottle or sippy cup filled with drinks other than water, the front teeth are repeatedly coated with sugars. Over time, this may eventually cause tooth decay.

FIRST TOOTH, FIRST VISIT

Bring your child to the dentist within 6 months of the arrival of the first tooth or by age 1.

At the dental exam, your child's dentist:

- Will check for signs of tooth decay and cavities;
 - Will give you tips on cleaning your child's teeth;
 - May have your child's teeth professionally cleaned;
 - May talk to you about good eating habits;
 - May take X-rays of your child's teeth;
 - May talk to you about dental sealants.
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SIGNS OF EARLY CHILDHOOD TOOTH DECAY

Once your child has teeth, check the teeth on a regular basis (at least once a month) for early signs of tooth decay. To do this, lay your child on your lap with his or her head tilted back. Lift the lips and look at the front and back of the top front teeth. If your child has molars, check them as well.

HERE'S WHAT TO LOOK FOR:

- Dull or chalky white spots or lines on the teeth. These spots or lines may also be on the part of the tooth next to the gums.
- Brown spots along the gum line of your child's teeth
- Dark teeth

If your child cries when eating cold, sweet or hard food, that may be another sign of tooth decay. If you see any of these signs, take your child to the dentist right away. Early childhood tooth decay must be treated quickly as this disease can cause your child needless pain and infection.

PREVENT EARLY CHILDHOOD TOOTH DECAY

Early childhood tooth decay is preventable. Here are ways to stop it:

- Never put your child to bed with a bottle or sippy cup of milk, breast milk, formula, juice or any liquid other than water.
- Between meals, give your infant or toddler water to drink.
- Try to wean your baby from a bottle by age 1 by encouraging your child to drink from a cup.
- Never give your child a pacifier (soother) dipped in sugar, honey, corn syrup or other sweetened liquids.
- Start cleaning your child's teeth as soon as the first tooth appears. Clean your child's gums and teeth every day. Wipe the gums with a clean cloth. Brush your child's teeth with a soft-bristled toothbrush.

BREAK THE BEDTIME BOTTLE HABIT

If you give your child a bottle at bedtime, stopping all at once will not be easy. To stop this habit, gradually replace the milk with water over a week or 2, until there is only plain water left. You may also try giving your child a clean soother, a stuffed toy or a blanket. If your child cries, do not give up. Comfort your child and try again.

BABY TEETH PLAY AN IMPORTANT ROLE

Your child's primary (baby) teeth are important and may be in your child's mouth until age 12. Your child needs these teeth to eat and to learn to speak properly. The health of your child's primary teeth can affect the health of the permanent (adult) teeth. Primary teeth hold the space for permanent teeth and help guide them into the correct position. They also contribute to healthy jaw development.

TREATING EARLY CHILDHOOD TOOTH DECAY

A dentist can treat early childhood tooth decay in a number of ways. The type of treatment depends on how badly the tooth is damaged. Treatments range from fluoride varnishes to dental fillings, crowns and tooth extractions.

KEEP YOUR CHILD'S TEETH HEALTHY

Even though your child's teeth will eventually fall out, it is important to keep them healthy until the permanent teeth come in. Here's why:

- Some of them will be in your child's mouth until age 12.
- They help your child to eat and speak properly.
- They affect the health of the permanent teeth.
- They hold the space for the permanent teeth.
- They guide the permanent teeth into the correct position.
- They contribute to healthy jaw development.
- If they are infected or chipped, this may affect your child's self-image.

