

Dental health begins with the first tooth



By Dr. Danielle Grenier

Q: My six-month-old's teeth have just started to show. What should I know to keep her teeth healthy?

A: Healthy teeth are an important part of your child's overall health. Caring for them begins when the first tooth peeks through your baby's gums.

The first primary (or "baby") tooth usually comes at about six months, but it isn't unusual for teeth to appear as early as three months or as late as 12 months.

Every child is different, but most will have all 20 primary teeth by three years. Some time around five or six years, your child will start to lose her primary teeth to make room for her permanent teeth.

Primary teeth give shape to your child's face, help guide permanent teeth into the right position in the mouth and are crucial for learning to eat and to speak. It's important to care for them well.

Primary teeth have a thinner outer enamel (a thin, hard, white substance that covers the tooth) than permanent teeth. This makes them at risk for early childhood tooth decay, which can begin as soon as the first tooth appears. Decay is caused by bacteria and occurs more easily if teeth keep coming into contact with sweet liquids – such as formula, milk, juice, and even breast milk (which contains sugar) – and are not cleaned right away.

Early childhood tooth decay can affect your child's health and cause pain, making it hard for her to sleep, eat or speak. It can also affect her ability to concentrate and learn. Children who develop dental decay at an early age are more likely to suffer from it throughout childhood.

Here are some basic points to keep in mind during your baby's first year:

Wipe your baby's gums with a soft, clean, damp cloth twice a day.

As soon as the first teeth appear, clean them at least once a day (usually at bedtime) with a soft bristle toothbrush designed for babies. Lay your baby on a flat surface or with his head cradled in your lap to brush teeth.

Avoid leaving your baby in bed with a bottle of formula or juice.

After six months:

Introduce a sippy cup for water and formula.

Avoid juice. If you do offer it, limit juice to no more than 60 to 120 mL (two to four oz) per day, in a cup rather than a bottle and only as part of a meal or snack.

If a bottle is needed at nap time, offer water rather than milk or juice.

If you breastfeed before nap time or at bedtime, be sure to clean your child's teeth before he goes to sleep.

Never sweeten a soother.

Don't put a soother or bottle nipple in your own mouth for any reason. Bacteria (including those which cause tooth decay), viruses and yeast infections can be passed between you and your child this way.

When your child is getting her teeth, her gums may be swollen and tender. You can help by:

Rubbing her gums with a clean finger.

Offering her something to chew on. A wet facecloth placed in the freezer for 30 minutes can be helpful, or a teething ring made of firm rubber. Do not give her teething biscuits, which may contain sugar.

Giving acetaminophen if needed. Do not use gel that can be rubbed on your child's gums. Your child may swallow it.

Do not ignore a fever. Getting new teeth does not make babies sick or give them a fever. If your baby is younger than six months call a doctor. Older children can be treated at home, as long as they get enough liquids and seem well otherwise.

Dr. Danielle Grenier is a general paediatrician in the Ottawa area. She is Medical Affairs Director for the Canadian Paediatric Society.

For more information on your child's growth and development, get answers from Canada's paediatric experts at www.caringforkids.cps.ca or www.soinsdenosenfants.cps.ca The website has new look and more information than ever. Visit often for news you can use, the latest information on your child's age and stage and helpful tips for every day.

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