

Teething feeder concerns

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Teething feeders are promoted by the manufacturer as “perfect for home or travel,” a way to introduce new tastes to infants and as a “way to give babies appropriate foods while reducing choking.”

Public health staff have expressed concern about these feeders, for a number of reasons.

Texture progression. Giving foods to infants using a mesh bag promotes “sucking” not chewing. According to Health Canada, at six months of age, infants are “ready to chew and need more texture in their food. At this age, important feeding behaviours include taking food from a spoon, chewing, self-feeding with fingers or a spoon and independent drinking from a cup or bottle.”

Delayed introduction of lumpy foods to children can affect a child’s food acceptance and feeding at seven years of age according to recently published research. Furthermore, eating finger foods (small pieces of food that baby can pick up and eat easily) allows children to learn how to bite and chew and to use their fingers and hands to feed themselves. It also allows infants to have some control over their own eating. Eating finger foods improves children’s co-ordination and helps them to get used to different food textures and flavours that may affect the acceptance of a variety of foods.

Babies can enjoy soft finger foods even before they have teeth since they can gum foods into smaller pieces.

Choking risk. Teething feeders are unnecessary if parents introduce foods when their infants are ready and if safety is always considered first.

Vegetables and fruit are not a choking hazard for infants when they are soft, cooked, grated or cut into tiny pieces. Hard and raw vegetables and fruit, especially those with pits, tough skin such as grapes, olives or grape tomatoes, and dried fruits are considered a choking hazard for young children. Make food safer for babies by grating raw vegetables to aid chewing, slicing grapes into quarters or halves, removing pits or seeds and gently cooking or steaming hard vegetables to soften them.

As for any food that is given to infants, supervision while they are eating is essential.

It is important to emphasize to parents that gagging is not the same as choking. All children will gag at times. They usually gag to prevent choking. The gag reflex propels undesirable items forward and out of the mouth. This reflex is strongest in infants and when this relaxes, it allows an infant to progress to more solid foods.

Dental. The mesh feeding bags can significantly increase the risk for dental cavities, especially if they are being used throughout the day. Bacteria in the mouth combined with sugar, even natural sugar, produce an acid. Each exposure of this acid on a child's new vulnerable teeth can last 20 minutes. Every time a baby sucks on the mesh bag, the acid attack starts over again. The repeated exposure of this acid will eventually dissolve and damage the enamel, (the outer coating of your child's tooth) resulting in tooth decay. To limit the damage, the frequency and length of time that food and drinks stay in contact with the teeth should be reduced. Also, the teeth and gums should be cleaned after each feeding especially before naps and bedtime.

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