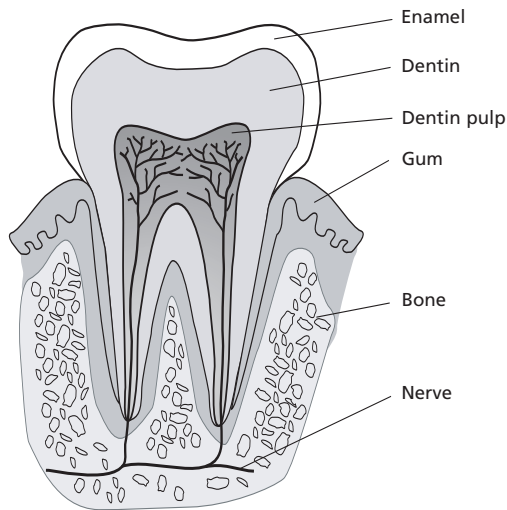


Let's Talk About...



Healthy teeth are an important building block to a life of good health. Strong teeth allow the digestive tract to work well, and add to a beautiful smile. Healthy teeth are so important, new mothers should begin caring for her child's teeth as soon as the baby is born.

What is tooth decay?

Everyone has bacteria in their mouth. When we eat, some kinds of bacteria cause the sugars in our food to change into an acid. The acid and bacteria join together to form a sticky substance, called plaque (plak), that sticks to teeth. The plaque attacks the teeth by destroying the enamel, the hard outer layer of the tooth. This is called a cavity. If the cavity is not treated, the decay will move into the inner layers of the tooth. It can be painful if the decay reaches the nerve in the center of the tooth (*see illustration*).

How should I care for my newborn's teeth?

Your child has 20 teeth at birth, many just under the surface of the gum. You can start caring for them even before they break through gums. Rub a damp washcloth over the gums to prevent a buildup of damaging bacteria. As soon as the teeth are showing, you can brush them with a soft toothbrush or a clean piece of cloth or gauze. You should start flossing once your baby has at least two teeth that touch.

Dental care

What is baby bottle tooth decay?

Many liquids fed to babies contain sugar, including milk, formula, fruit juice, sodas and other sweetened drinks. They can pool around teeth and gums. If the sugars stay in your infant's mouth for a long time, tooth decay can start.

It is easy to prevent this from happening. Wipe or brush your child's teeth and gums after every feeding. Do not allow her to walk around with a cup or bottle of sweet liquid. Never allow a child to fall asleep with a bottle. If the child refuses to sleep without a bottle, do not fill it with anything but water.

If your child is now sleeping with a bottle of sweet liquid, begin to wean her off of it. Start mixing it with a little water each night. Keep adding more and more water each time so that after a little while she is sleeping with a bottle of water.

How soon should my child see a dentist?

The American Dental Association recommends that children see a dentist before their first birthday. At the first visit, the dentist will give your child a modified exam (while you hold her in your lap) and explain how to brush and floss the correct way. Visits at this young age will get your child used to going to the dentist. This will help her be more comfortable with the idea when she is older.

You may want to take your child to a pediatric dentist, or one who specializes in treating children. Their primary goal is to prevent problems from developing by regular exams and stressing proper daily care.

How can I prevent cavities in my child?

- Brush your child's teeth with a fluoride toothpaste after each time she eats. If that isn't possible, be sure to brush her teeth at least twice a day, especially before bedtime. Brush the teeth up and down in a circular motion. Children as young as two or three can begin to use toothpaste, as long as they are supervised. A pea-size amount of toothpaste is all that is needed for a toddler. Make sure she spits it out instead of swallowing it.

- Floss between each of your child's teeth at least once a day. Children can be taught to floss their own teeth when they are seven or eight years old.
- Sealants, which are made from a resin, can be applied to keep bacteria away from permanent teeth. This is especially helpful on the molars (back teeth), because they are hard to reach and can be missed when brushing, allowing cavities to form.
- Limit the amount of sweets and sodas that your child eats. Be sure your child has regular check-ups with her dentist.

Why does my child need crowns or caps?

A dentist may decide to put a stainless steel crown on your child's tooth if the tooth is broken, or if there is excessive decay or malformation of baby teeth. A small amount of decay will destroy a baby tooth very quickly. The crown protects the tooth by preventing the decay from spreading.

If your child has many problems in the mouth, or has to have a complicated dental procedure, the dentist may recommend general anesthesia to put your child to sleep during the procedure. Good dental hygiene (brushing and flossing) can help prevent the need for this kind of extensive dental work.

Does my special needs child have unique dental needs?

Some special children tend to have more tooth decay and gum disease. They may require medication or have a special diet that leads to tooth decay. If dental care is started early and followed regularly, many dental problems can be lessened or avoided.

Some children need more support to feel comfortable. A pediatric dentist can work with you to select a technique based on the specific health care needs of your child. Pediatric dentists have

two more years of advanced training that focuses on children with special needs.

What should I know about injuries to the mouth?

Injuries to the mouth may include teeth that have been knocked out, forced out of position or broken. Lips, gums and cheeks may have been cut. Oral injuries, or injuries to the mouth, can be painful and should be treated by a dentist as soon as possible.

If a tooth has been knocked out, gently rinse it off and put it in a cup of milk or wrap it in a clean cloth or gauze. This will keep the tooth moist and safe. Go to the dentist right away. The tooth can often be replanted successfully within an hour of the injury.

If the tooth is broken, the dentist can smooth it with a special drill. Sometimes the tooth can be restored with a filling. Your child may need a crown to repair the tooth.

To prevent dental injuries, do not allow your child to wear retainers, bridges or partial dentures when playing sports. Do wear a properly fitted mouth guard.

How do I take care of my child after dental surgery?

Your child should avoid eating anything sticky, hard or chewy for one day. Offer her soft foods like yogurt or applesauce instead. Pain medication should be taken as prescribed by your dentist. A small amount of bleeding is normal.

When your child has a tooth pulled, a blood clot forms in the empty socket to stop the blood from flowing. Drinking through a straw or rinsing her mouth very hard could dislodge the clot and your child could start bleeding again. For the first few days, your child should rinse her mouth gently and avoid the teeth close to the socket when she brushes her teeth.

For pain and swelling, apply a cold cloth or an ice bag to the cheek.

