

# Let's Talk About...

## Dental Care

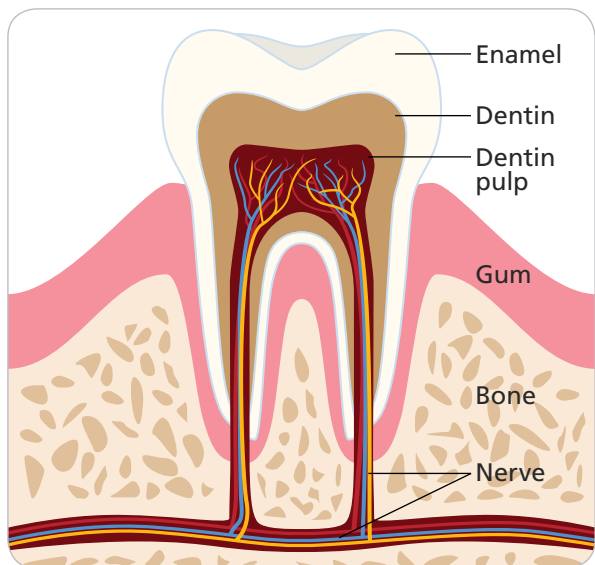
Healthy teeth are an important building block for a life of good health. Strong teeth help your child's jaw grow normally and let them chew, speak, and smile. New parents should begin thinking about their child's teeth as soon as the baby is born.

### How should I take care of my newborn's teeth?

Your baby has 20 teeth at birth, just under the gum surface. You can start caring for teeth even before they break through the gum. Rub a damp washcloth over your baby's gums after feeding to keep bacteria from building up. As soon as the teeth show, brush them with a soft toothbrush or a piece of clean cloth or gauze 2 times each day. You should also start flossing your baby's teeth when they have at least 2 teeth that touch.

### What is tooth decay?

Everyone has bacteria in their mouth. These bacteria live in a sticky substance called plaque [plak] that attaches to teeth. When we eat, bacteria in the plaque change sugar from food into an acid. Acid can destroy the hard, outer layer of the tooth called enamel. This is what causes tooth decay (a cavity). If the cavity is not treated, decay can spread into the inner layers of the tooth near the nerve. This causes pain and infection.



### What is early childhood decay?

Sometimes called baby-bottle tooth decay or nursing decay, this is early cavities caused by drinking sugar often. Many liquids fed to babies contain sugar, such as dairy milk, mother's milk, formula, fruit juice, sodas, and other sweetened drinks. These drinks can pool around teeth and gums. If the sugar stays in your baby'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 twice each day. Do not give your child a cup or bottle of sweet liquid between feedings. Never allow a child to fall asleep with a bottle. Never let your baby breastfeed at will during the night. If your child needs a bottle or sippy cup between meals or won't sleep without a bottle, give them water only.

## How soon should my baby see a dentist?

The American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry recommends that children see a dentist before their first birthday. At the first visit, the dentist will check your child and explain how to brush and floss the right way. Visits at this young age let parents ask questions about prevention and help your child get used to going to the dentist.

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



## How can I prevent tooth decay in my child?

Here are some ways you can help prevent cavities in your baby or child:

- Brush your child's teeth at least twice a day, including before bedtime. Brush the teeth up and down in a circular motion. For children under 3, use a rice-sized amount of toothpaste with fluoride. As children get older and start using more toothpaste, make sure they spit the toothpaste out instead of swallowing it. When older children begin to brush their own teeth, watch them brush to make sure they brush long enough and clean all of their teeth.

- Floss between each of your child's teeth once a day. Children can be taught to floss their own teeth when they are 7 or 8 years old.
- Sealants can be applied to keep bacteria out of the grooves of permanent teeth. This is especially helpful on the molars (back teeth). Molars are hard to reach and can be missed when brushing, allowing cavities to form.
- Limit sweets and sugary drinks to regular mealtimes only. Snacking on sugary foods or drinks between meals can increase the chance of getting cavities.
- Be sure your child has regular dental check-ups every 6 months.

## Why does my child need to have baby teeth fixed?

Baby teeth are important and should be fixed when they have a cavity. **A small amount of decay can destroy a baby tooth very quickly, so do not wait to get teeth fixed.** Fixing a tooth may require a filling or a crown (also called a cap). A dentist may decide to put a white or stainless-steel crown on your child's tooth if the tooth is broken, the wrong shape, or has a lot of decay.

## Why does my child need sedation or anesthesia?

If your child has many problems in their mouth or needs a complicated dental procedure, the dentist may recommend sedation [si-DEY-shuhn] or general anesthesia [ann-us-THEE-zuh]. These medications will put your child to sleep during the procedure.

A pediatric dentist can work with you to decide the best treatment, based on your child's specific healthcare needs. Pediatric dentists have 2 extra years of advanced training that include sedation for children.

## How do I take care of my child after a dental procedure?

Your child should not eat anything sticky, hard, or chewy for 1 day after the procedure. Give them soft foods like yogurt or applesauce instead. Have your child take the pain medication prescribed by your dentist. A small amount of bleeding is normal.

If your child has a tooth pulled, a blood clot forms in the empty socket to stop the blood from flowing. **Do not let your child drink through a straw or rinse their mouth very hard. This could make the clot come out and cause more bleeding.** For the first few days, your child should brush carefully around the socket and rinse gently. For pain and swelling, apply a cold cloth or an ice bag to your child's cheek.

## Does my special needs child have special dental needs?

Some children with special needs have more tooth decay and gum disease because of medications they take or the special diet they eat. If good dental care starts early, your child may have fewer problems or no problems with their teeth. Pediatric dentists have special training in caring for children with special needs.

## What should I know about mouth injuries?

Teeth can get knocked out, forced out of position, or broken. Lips, gums, and cheeks can get cut. Mouth injuries like these can be painful and should be evaluated and 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 piece of cloth or gauze. This will keep the tooth moist and safe. **Take the tooth to the dentist right away. It can often be replanted successfully within an hour of the injury.** If a tooth is broken, the dentist can smooth it or repair it with a filling or crown.

To prevent dental injuries, have your child wear a mouthguard that fits well when playing sports that could cause mouth injuries.

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