

Let's Talk About...

Early childhood tooth decay/Baby bottle tooth decay

Early childhood tooth decay occurs when a child frequently uses a baby bottle with sugared drinks.

What happens?

A tooth can start decaying as soon as it appears. High levels of acid in the mouth cause tooth decay. Acid forms when normal germs inside the mouth interact with sugars and starches. As acid forms, it eats away at the tooth's protective enamel coating. Sugars and starches are found in things like crackers, fruit snacks, juices, soda pop, formula, breast milk, fruit juices, even 100% juice, and other sugared drinks. These can all cause decay if they are in contact with teeth for a long period of time. During the day, it is normal to produce lots of saliva (spit). This helps clean and protect the teeth. At night, the child does not produce as much saliva. This means food and drink stay on the teeth for a much longer time. A bedtime bottle or at will nursing, after your child gets their first tooth, can lead to such severe tooth decay that teeth may break down and require repair or even being pulled.

What do I look for?

Check your baby's mouth to make sure their teeth and gums look healthy. Your baby's teeth will begin to erupt around 6 months and continue until he or she is roughly 2.5 years old. These teeth act as guides and space holders for the permanent teeth that come later, so it is important for the baby teeth to stay and not have them decay and fall out early. Baby bottle tooth decay shows up first as white spots along the gumline on the upper front teeth. These spots are hard to see at first, even for a doctor or dentist. A child with tooth decay needs to be treated early so the decay does not spread in their mouth. If you think your child has tooth decay, take them to your dentist.



How does the dentist treat early childhood tooth decay?

Usually your baby's teeth can be filled like an adult's. If there are many decayed teeth, the dentist may be able to give your child some medicine to make them sleepy (a sedative) during the procedure. This may be a medicine your child takes by mouth, like a pill or liquid, or it may be given in an IV (small tube that goes into the vein). If needed, the dentist may treat your child's teeth in the operating room. If much of the tooth has decay, the dentist may place a stainless steel crown on the tooth to protect the tooth and prevent new decay. The dentist may place tooth-colored crowns on the front teeth.

Sometimes, if the decay is severe, the dentist will remove the tooth to prevent harm to the forming adult teeth. The dentist may put in a space maintainer to keep the tooth spacing until permanent teeth appear. This prevents teeth from being crowded.

How do I prevent my child from having early childhood tooth decay?

- Limit sugary drinks and frequent eating during the day. Don't give your baby food or drinks at bedtime and avoid nighttime nursing, after your child gets their first tooth. Use a pacifier at bedtime instead of a bottle. If your baby must have a bottle at bedtime to sleep, fill the bottle with water.
- After the bedtime feeding, brush your child's teeth with a very small amount of toothpaste with fluoride (enough to be covered on the toothbrush). It is best to brush the teeth. Wiping teeth is not as effective and should be avoided.
- Never dip a pacifier in honey or syrup before you give it to your child.
- Feed your child a balanced diet.
- Do not wait for a problem before you bring your child to the dentist. Children should see a pediatric dentist by the age of one or when the first tooth erupts into the mouth.
- Give fluoride drops as directed by your doctor or dentist. Do not give your child milk with the fluoride drops because milk prevents the fluoride from being used by the body.
- Teach your child to drink from a cup as soon as possible (usually by one year old). You can use "sippy cups" to help prevent spills when your child is learning.
- Dental decay is a contagious disease. The bacteria that cause cavities can be transferred from parents (especially mom) to children. As a parent it is important to maintain your own good dental health and not share spoons, other utensils and cups/glasses with your child.

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