

Protecting Your Child's Oral Health

Cavities among preschoolers increase.

Recent news articles have called attention to an increase in the number of young children who have so many cavities in their teeth they must be hospitalized and receive general anesthesia for their dental treatment. And these are baby teeth.

In the most recent national survey of children's oral health, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention noted an increase—the first in 40 years—in the number of preschoolers with cavities.¹ **And dentists nationwide are seeing more preschoolers at all income levels with six to 10 cavities, or more. The level of decay is so severe that dentists often recommend using deep sedation or general anesthesia because young children are unlikely to sit through such extensive procedures when they are awake.**

The good news is that cavities are nearly 100 percent preventable. Consider these recommendations for your young children.

Oral health care should begin at birth.

Before the first tooth appears, dentists recommend that caregivers wipe the baby's gums with a damp washcloth or soft infant toothbrush after meals. This gets the child used to the parent brushing in the mouth. Once the first tooth erupts, start brushing gently with a soft, baby-sized toothbrush twice a day.



Twenty-eight percent of caregivers don't clean their baby's gums. Among those who do, 28 percent clean them just a few times a week, or less often.²

Never put a child to bed with a bottle of milk, juice, sweetened water, or soft drinks. The sugar in these beverages can lead to severe tooth decay. Instead, give the baby a pacifier; or, if they need fluid, offer plain water at bedtime. The same goes for drinking and snacking between meals. Don't let your toddler walk around with a bottle filled with milk, fruit juice, or other sweetened beverages, or use the bottle as a pacifier. Give your child a reasonable amount of time to drink the contents of their bottle or sippy cup, and then remove it.

Tooth decay in infants and young children most often begins in the upper front teeth, but also may affect other teeth. Parents may not realize that a baby's teeth can decay soon after they first appear—a problem frequently referred to as “baby bottle tooth decay,” which is caused by long-term exposure of a child's teeth to liquids containing sugars and acids. The decay may even enter the underlying bone structure, which can hurt development of the permanent teeth.

Nearly one in five caregivers (17 percent) with a child four years old or younger report that their child goes to bed every night with a bottle or cup containing milk or juice.³

Schedule your child's first appointment by age 1.

The ideal time for a child's first dentist appointment is six months after the first primary teeth erupt. This time frame is a perfect opportunity for the dentist to carefully examine the development of your child's mouth. Dental problems often start early, so the sooner the visit the better. To safeguard against problems such as baby bottle tooth decay, teething irritations, gum disease and prolonged thumb-sucking, your dentist can provide or recommend special preventive care.

Teach your kids to love their teeth.

Simple preventive care, including brushing at least twice a day, flossing daily and making regular dentist visits, ranks high for fighting cavities in children.

- Begin using a small dab of fluoride toothpaste when brushing your child's teeth at the age of 24 months. Your dentist may recommend earlier use if he or she believes your child is at moderate or higher risk for tooth decay.
- Start flossing when any two of your child's teeth are touching and you can't clean adequately between them with a toothbrush.
- Help your child begin to brush his or her own teeth as soon as they are able, usually around age two.
- Supervise and assist with brushing and flossing until the child has demonstrated the coordination and willingness to consistently do a thorough job on his or her own—usually around age six to eight.
- Give your kids child-sized toothbrushes for ease of use. The variety of colors and designs can provide extra fun and motivation to keep them brushing.
- Check your children's toothbrushes often; when the bristles begin to splay apart they need to be replaced. Chewing on the bristles makes the brush wear out sooner.
- Examine your child's gums for the signs of bleeding, swelling, redness or receding away from the teeth. Persistent bad breath or any of the above signs may indicate gum disease.

- Serve as a good role model by practicing good oral health care habits yourself.
- Schedule regular dental visits for family checkups, periodontal evaluations and cleanings.

Sealants help prevent cavities.

An American Dental Association evidence-based review of dental sealants found that sealants are an effective tool to help children fight tooth decay early in their lives.

According to the report, children with sealants on their first permanent molars had a 76 percent reduction in tooth decay versus children without sealants.

Sealants are usually applied to the chewing surfaces of permanent molars to act as a barrier between the tooth and harmful bacteria.

They are most effective when applied to decay-susceptible surfaces, especially the naturally occurring pits and fissures on a tooth's chewing surface, as soon as possible after the teeth come in. With sealants, there is no drilling and no discomfort. Typically, either the dentist or dental hygienist applies sealants. Application takes less time than having a tooth filled.

Pit-and-fissure sealants are an important part of a comprehensive approach to tooth decay prevention. Combined with regular use of fluoride toothpaste, fluoridated water and regular dental visits, you can prevent cavities entirely.

For more information about oral health care, visit our website at www.deltadental.com and click on the Oral Health and Wellness section.

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- 1 Dye BA, Tan S, Smith V, et al. Trends in oral health status: United States, 1988–1994 and 1999–2004. *Vital Health Stat.* 2007 Apr; 11(248):1-92.
 - 2 Delta Dental Children's Oral Health Survey, 2011.
 - 3 Delta Dental Children's Oral Health Survey, 2011.
 - 4 Beauchamp J, Caufield PW, Crall JJ, et al. Evidence-Based Clinical Recommendations for the Use of Pit-and-Fissure Sealants - A Report of the American Dental Association Council on Scientific Affairs. *The Journal of the American Dental Association* March 2008 vol. 139 no. 3 257-268.