

# EARLY CHILDHOOD CARIES (CAVITIES)

## A HEALTHY START IS SMART

Did you know that tooth decay is still the single most common chronic childhood disease-five times more common than asthma and seven times more common than hay fever? The good news is that tooth decay is preventable!

### WHAT CAUSES TOOTH DECAY?

Bacteria in the mouth use the sugars found in liquids and foods to produce acids that attack the teeth. Each time these liquids or foods are consumed, acids attack the teeth for 20 minutes or longer. After many attacks, tooth decay can develop.

### HOW TO KEEP YOUR CHILD'S TEETH HEALTHY

Babies and young children rely on parents and caregivers for good health. Take an active role in caring for your child's teeth by cleaning them at home, providing a balanced diet, and scheduling regular dental visits. It is important that parents and caregivers teach and practice healthy habits that children will continue into adulthood. Keeping your child's smile healthy is a team effort.

### START ORAL CARE EARLY AT HOME

- Wipe the baby's gums with a clean, wet gauze or washcloth after each feeding. This removes food particles that can harm erupting teeth and helps the child grow accustomed to having his or her mouth cleaned.
- Begin brushing your baby's teeth with water as soon as the first tooth appears. Use a soft-bristled, child-sized toothbrush. Continue cleaning and massaging the gums in all other areas that remain toothless. Replace the toothbrush when the bristles become worn or frayed.
- If you are considering using fluoride toothpaste before your child's second birthday, ask your dentist or physician first. When toothpaste is used, parents and caregivers should only place a smear, or split-pea sized amount of paste on their child's toothbrush.
- Young children should be supervised while brushing and taught to spit out, not swallow the toothpaste.

### BOTTLES AND BREASTFEEDING

- Infants should finish their bedtime or naptime bottle before going to bed.
- After your child's first tooth erupts, he or she should not be allowed to breastfeed continuously or fall asleep while breastfeeding.
- Infants should not be put to bed or allowed to fall asleep with a bottle that contains milk, formula, fruit juices, sweetened liquids or a pacifier dipped in sugar or honey. Even diluted drinks can be damaging.
- A bottle should not be used as a pacifier. Offering a bottle containing sugary liquid as a pacifier many times a day increases the number of acid attacks and encourages tooth decay.

### TRAINING CUPS

- To reduce the risk of tooth decay, children should be encouraged to drink from a cup by their first birthday.
- Do not let your baby constantly sip on liquids containing sugar (including milk and juice drinks) because that encourages tooth decay. Offer these liquids only at mealtimes. If your child is thirsty between meals, offer water in the cup.
- Do not let your child carry the training cup around, or get into the habit of keeping it within reach while riding in a car or stroller. At-will, frequent sips of sugary liquids encourages tooth decay.
- Falling while drinking from a training cup can cause injury to the mouth or teeth.
- Training cups should be used TEMPORARILY. Once your child has learned how to sip, the training cup has achieved its purpose. It can and should be set aside when no longer needed.

# EARLY CHILDHOOD CARIES A HEALTHY START IS SMART (CONT...)

## DIET

- Infants and young children should be provided with a balanced diet. Helpful information can be found on the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Food Pyramid website: [www.mypyramid.gov](http://www.mypyramid.gov).
- Limit snacks between meals.
- Avoid using sweet foods and drinks to reward your child.
- Limit your child's consumption of sweets to meal times.

## FIRST DENTAL VISIT

- It is beneficial for the first visit to occur within six month of the eruption of the first tooth and no later than the baby's first birthday. Consider this first visit as the "healthy baby checkup" for your child's teeth.
- During this visit, your dentist will check for decay and other conditions and show you how to properly clean your child's teeth. Additionally, the dentist may recommend oral care products for your family.
- Children should receive an optimal level of fluoride to help prevent tooth decay. Whether or not you live in a community that has fluoridated water, ask your dentist about how your child can get the right amount of fluoride.

## WHY ARE BABY TEETH IMPORTANT?

- Baby teeth hold space in the jaw for the permanent teeth. If a baby tooth is lost too early, the teeth beside it may drift into the empty space. When it's time for the permanent teeth to come in, there may not be enough room for them to erupt properly. This may lead to crooked teeth that are crowded, or out of alignment, making them difficult to keep clean. Teeth that are not kept clean are more likely to decay. In addition, crooked teeth can also affect your child's self-esteem. Your child may grow up feeling bad about his or her smile and hide behind frowns, clenched lips, and shielding hands. An attractive smile is an important form of interaction, too. A nice-looking smile is a social asset during the formative school years.

## WHAT IS EARLY CHILDHOOD CARIES?

- Early Childhood Caries (ECC) is tooth decay that occurs in the baby teeth of young children. It occurs when the child's teeth are frequently exposed to fermentable carbohydrates (sugars) for long periods of time. Tooth decay can begin as soon as teeth emerge in a baby's mouth-usually by age six months or so. Unfortunately, decay in baby teeth can progress rapidly to cause pain and even harm the permanent teeth that are still growing under the gums. Left untreated, it can destroy the teeth of an infant or young child. Tooth decay can also have an effect on a child's general health.



White Spots - Early ECC



Moderate ECC



Advanced ECC

