

Frequently Asked Questions: Early Childhood Dental Care

Source: American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry

About the Dentist

Q. When should my child first see a dentist?

A: "First visit by first birthday" sums it up. Your child should visit a pediatric dentist when the first tooth comes in, usually between six and twelve months of age. Early examination and preventive care will protect your child's smile now and in the future.

At West Metro Pediatric Dentistry, we feel it is so important to make sure your child visits the dentist early that we offer all patients under 2 a free new patient exam. We'll perform a "happy visit" where we introduce your child to the office and the "magic chair" and talk to them about "sugar bugs" and healthy foods. Then we'll count their teeth and the dentist will talk with them about keeping their teeth clean and healthy. We'll end the visit with a special gift from our prize tower.

Q. Why so early? What dental problems could a baby have?

A: The most important reason is to begin a thorough prevention program. Dental problems can begin early. A big concern is Early Childhood Caries (also known as baby bottle tooth decay or nursing caries). Your child risks severe decay from using a bottle during naps or at night or when they nurse continuously from the breast.

Q: What is the difference between a pediatric dentist and a family dentist?

A: Pediatric dentists are the pediatricians of dentistry. A pediatric dentist has two to three years specialty training following dental school and limits his/her practice to treating children only. Pediatric dentists are primary and specialty oral care providers for infants and children through adolescence, including those with special health needs.

Q: How often does my child need to see the pediatric dentist?

A: A check-up every six months is recommended in order to prevent cavities and other dental problems. However, your pediatric dentist can tell you when and how often your child should visit based on their personal oral health.

About Baby Teeth

Q: Are baby teeth really that important to my child?

A: Primary, or "baby," teeth are important for many reasons. Not only do they help children speak clearly and chew naturally, they also aid in forming a path that permanent teeth can follow when they are ready to erupt.

Q. Any advice on teething?

A: From six months to age 3, your child may have sore gums when teeth erupt. Many children like a clean teething ring, cool spoon, or cold wet washcloth. Some parents swear by a chilled ring; others simply rub the baby's gums with a clean finger.

Q: How do I make my child's diet safe for his teeth?

Make sure your child has a balanced diet, including one serving each of: fruits and vegetables, breads and cereals, milk and dairy products, and meat fish and eggs. Limiting the servings of sugars and starches will also aid in protecting your child's teeth from decay. You can also ask your pediatric dentist to help you select foods that protect your children's teeth.

About Cleaning Baby Teeth

Q. When should I start cleaning my baby's teeth?

A: The sooner the better! With the eruption of the first teeth, clean your child's gum with a soft infant toothbrush. For children less than 2 years old, use only a smear of toothpaste. For children over 2, a pea-sized amount of toothpaste should be used. Remember that most children under 7 years of age do not have the dexterity to brush their teeth effectively, so work with your child to teach good brushing habits.

Q: What should I use to clean my baby's teeth?

A: A toothbrush will remove plaque bacteria that can lead to decay. Any soft-bristled toothbrush with a small head, preferably one designed specifically for infants, should be used at least once a day at bedtime.

Q: Toothpaste: when should we begin using it and how much should we use?

A: Fluoridated toothpaste should be introduced as soon as the age of 1. Prior to that, parents should clean the child's teeth with water and a soft-bristled toothbrush. When toothpaste is used, parents should supervise brushing and make sure the child uses no more than a pea-sized amount on the brush. Children should spit out and not swallow excess toothpaste after brushing.

About Nursing and Bottle Feeding and Sippy Cups

Q. How can I prevent tooth decay from a bottle or nursing?

A: Encourage your child to drink from a cup as they approach their first birthday. Children should not fall asleep with a bottle. At-will nighttime breast-feeding should be avoided after the first primary (baby) teeth begin to erupt. Drinking juice from a bottle should be avoided. When juice is offered, it should be in a cup.

Q. How often should my baby feed from a bottle?

A: It's not just what children drink, but how often and for how long their teeth are exposed to decay-causing acids. For example, if you offer a bottle containing sugary liquid as a pacifier many times a day, you increase the number of acid attacks. In the same way, allowing a child to fall asleep with a bottle during a nap or at night also can harm teeth. While the baby sleeps, the flow of saliva decreases. Harmful sugary liquids collect and remain around the teeth, inviting acid attacks.

You can prevent this by watching what you give the baby between regular feedings. A nursing bottle should not be used as a pacifier or as an aid to help baby sleep, unless it contains plain water.

Q. When should bottle-feeding be stopped?

A: Children should be weaned from the bottle at 12-14 months of age.

About Thumb Sucking

Q. Should I worry about thumb and finger sucking?

A: Thumb sucking is perfectly normal for infants; most stop by age 2. If your child does not, discourage it after age 4. Prolonged thumb sucking can create crowded, crooked teeth, or bite problems. Your pediatric dentist will be glad to suggest ways to address a prolonged thumb sucking habit.

Q: Are these habits bad for the teeth and jaws?

A: Most children stop sucking on thumbs, pacifiers or other objects on their own between two and four years of age. No harm is done to their teeth or jaws. However, some children repeatedly suck on a finger, pacifier or other object over long periods of time. In these children, the upper front teeth may tip toward the lip or not come in properly.

Q: When should I worry about a sucking habit?

A: Your pediatric dentist will carefully watch the way your child's teeth come in and jaws develop, keeping the sucking habit in mind at all times. For most children the AAPD recommends encouraging these habits cease by age three.

Q: What can I do to stop my child's habit?

A: Most children stop sucking habits on their own, but some children need the help of their parents and their pediatric dentist. When your child is old enough to understand the possible results of a sucking habit, your pediatric dentist can encourage your child to stop, as well as talk about what happens to the teeth if your child doesn't stop. This advice, coupled with support from parents, helps most children quit. If this approach doesn't work, your pediatric dentist may recommend a mouth appliance that blocks sucking habits.

A Parent's Checklist: The First Dental Visit

- ✓ I scheduled the first dental visit between 6 months and one year.
- ✓ I chose a pediatric dental practice. I appreciate their special training; my child appreciates the toys and child-size furniture.
- ✓ I selected an appointment time when my child is usually alert, not tired.
- ✓ I was upbeat with my child about the visit, explaining that the dentist will help keep my child's smile bright and healthy.
- ✓ I answered all my child's questions positively and did not use any scary words.
- ✓ I was asked to provide a complete medical and dental history about my child.
- ✓ The pediatric dentist gently but thoroughly examined my child's mouth. He or she observed oral and facial development and looked for any signs of potential problems.
- ✓ I was informed about my child's tooth development, the causes and prevention of dental disease and appropriate diet and home dental care.
- ✓ The pediatric dentist and members of the dental team answered my questions on such matters as diet, teething, thumb sucking and pacifiers.
- ✓ The dentist and support staff did everything possible to help my child feel comfortable during the visit.

Dental Emergencies: What to Do

If a Baby Tooth is Knocked Out:

- ▲ Contact a pediatric dentist as soon as possible. Quick action can lessen a child's discomfort and prevent infection.
- ▲ Rinse the mouth with water and apply cold compresses to reduce swelling.
- ▲ Spend time comforting your child rather than looking for the tooth. Remember, baby teeth are not replantable.
- ▲ The pediatric dentist may make an appliance to replace the missing tooth so your child's smile will be normal again.

If a Permanent Tooth is Knocked Out:

- ▲ Find the tooth. Rinse it gently in cool water. (Do not scrub it or use soap.)
- ▲ Replace the tooth in the socket and hold it there with clean gauze or a wash cloth. (If you can not put the tooth back in the socket, place the tooth in a clean container with milk or water.)
- ▲ Take your child and the tooth to a pediatric dental office immediately. (Call the emergency number if it is after hours.)

A Tooth is Chipped or Broken:

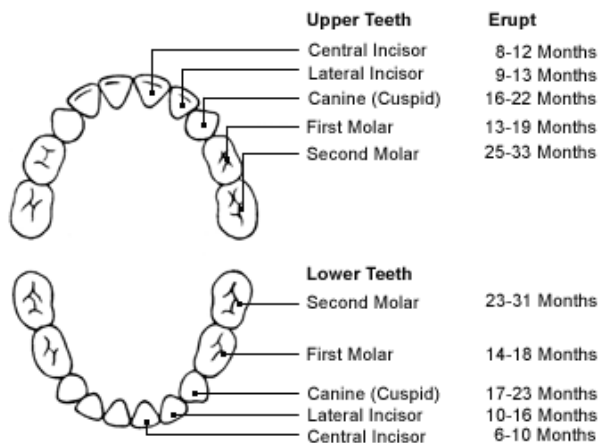
- ▲ Contact a pediatric dentist immediately. Fast action can save the tooth, prevent infection, and reduce the need for extensive dental treatment.
- ▲ Rinse the mouth with water and apply cold compresses to reduce swelling.
- ▲ If you can find the broken tooth fragment, take it with you to the dentist.

A Toothache:

- ▲ Call your pediatric dentist and visit the office promptly.
- ▲ Rinse the mouth with water and apply a cold compress or ice wrapped in a cloth.
- ▲ Do not put heat or aspirin on the sore area.

Tooth Eruption Charts

Primary Teeth



Permanent Teeth

