

Helping your child fight tooth decay



Tooth decay is the first step to a cavity. Just like adults, even healthy babies can have bacteria in their mouths. Sugar from food or drinks can cause some types of this oral bacteria to produce acid, which can break the tooth down. This is tooth decay. Anytime a child younger than 6 years has tooth decay and needs a filling or has lost a tooth because of a cavity, he or she has early childhood caries (ECC).¹

ECC can be painful, and it can make your child sick—sick enough to go to the emergency room or even have to stay at the hospital.

WHAT CAUSES EARLY CHILDHOOD CARIES?

Bacteria

The risk of developing ECC starts with the introduction of decay-causing bacteria into a baby's mouth. This can happen anytime a baby comes in contact with someone else's saliva, for example, through kissing on the lips or sharing a spoon.

Sugary drinks and snacks

What your child eats or drinks can set off tooth decay. Drinks like juice, formula, soft drinks, and even milk can trigger the bacteria in the mouth to produce acid. Crackers, cereal, and other starchy or sweet food can increase the risk of tooth decay, too.

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

There are some steps you can take to lower your child's risk of tooth decay:

- use fluoridated water, which helps harden the outside of teeth and protects them from decay, in your child's bottle or sippy cup;
- limit sugary snacks and drinks like crackers and juices;
- do not give a bottle or sippy cup to your child when he or she is going to bed or taking a nap;
- take your baby to the dentist by his or her first birthday so the dentist can check your baby's oral health and give you tips on caring for your baby's mouth;
- start brushing as soon as that first tooth comes in (Box);
- as soon as 2 teeth come in next to each other, start cleaning between the teeth 1 time per day. Talk to your dentist or dental hygienist about how to do this.

CONCLUSION

Baby teeth are important. Protect them from tooth decay with a healthy diet, good brushing habits, and a relationship with a dentist that starts in the first year. ■

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Box. How to brush

- Brush your child's teeth gently twice a day with a child-sized toothbrush that has soft bristles.
- Use the right amount of toothpaste for the child's age—younger children use less than older children (Figure).



Figure 1. For children younger than 3 years, use only a small amount of toothpaste (about the size of a grain of rice). For children older than 3 years, use no more than a pea-sized amount.

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1. American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry Council on Clinical Affairs. Policy on Early Childhood Caries (ECC): Classifications, Consequences, and Preventive Strategies. Available at: <https://www.aapd.org/research/oral-health-policies-recommendations/early-childhood-carries-classifications-consequences-and-preventive-strategies/>. Accessed November 6, 2019.