

## Oral health

**Many people think that 'baby' teeth are less important than 'adult' teeth, but looking after your child's first teeth is vital. In fact, good oral health begins even before these first teeth appear. A combination of good brushing, a healthy diet and regular visits to the dentist will help your child to grow strong and healthy teeth.**

### Brushing and cleaning teeth

Even before teeth appear, it's a good idea to clean your baby's gums and tongue using water and a washcloth or an extra soft brush after feeds, particularly in the mornings and evenings.

As soon as the first tooth appears, use a soft toothbrush designed for children under two years of age. (This is also the time for your baby's first visit to a paediatric dentist.) Brush with water at least twice a day, particularly after the first and last feeds. Very young children do not need to use toothpaste. You can start using a low-fluoride child's toothpaste (just a thin smear) on your child's toothbrush from when they are 18 months old.

Young children should brush their teeth twice a day – once after breakfast and once after dinner. As well as brushing, older children can be encouraged to rinse their mouths with water after meals and snacks. Until about the age of eight, your child will need your help and supervision cleaning their teeth. (A good measure is when children can tie their own shoe laces, they are generally able to manage cleaning their own teeth as well.) Remember that you are a role model for your child, so let him or her see you cleaning your teeth and making healthy food and drink choices.

### Healthy eating to prevent tooth decay

- Avoid sweet, sticky foods and drinks – these contribute to tooth decay as sugars form acids that can attack tooth enamel.
- Food and drinks that are nibbled or sipped over longer periods of time, such as a lollipop, are more likely to cause tooth decay.
- Babies under 4-6 months only need breast milk or formula.
- Water is the best drink for children (in areas with fluoride in the water, tap water is of particular benefit and bottled water should be avoided). After brushing their teeth at night, it's best to only offer children water for a drink. During the day, unflavoured milk is a suitable alternative to water as it is free of added sugar.
- When children are old enough, encourage them to drink water or rinse their mouth out after they've eaten.

### Oral health tips

- Remember that you can look after your child's teeth even before they appear.
- Don't settle your baby in bed with a bottle of milk.
- Give up bottle feeding by 12 months; an infant feeding cup is a good alternative.
- Take your child to see a dentist by the time they are two years old.
- Celebrate when your child loses a tooth – it's a big event for children, particularly the first time.
- Avoid using dummies after your child is four years old.

An initiative of The Royal Children's Hospital Melbourne, Centre for Community Child Health

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