

Tooth Decay and Dental Care

Regular visits to the dentist are very important for children. Don't put your baby to bed with a bottle, because this can cause tooth decay. Regular brushing and dental visits can help keep your child's teeth as sound and strong as possible.

What is tooth decay?

Tooth decay—also called cavities or dental caries—is the main dental problem in children. Certain bacteria in the mouth use sugars to make acids, which can eat away at the outer surface (enamel) of your child's teeth. Some sugars like sucrose (used in candy) are worse than others in causing tooth decay. The longer the sugars are in contact with bacteria in the mouth, the greater the chance of decay.

To prevent cavities, make sure your child gets enough fluoride, which is usually present in water. Your child should brush his or her teeth with a fluoride-containing toothpaste and be careful about drinking and eating too many sweets. Regular dental visits are important to prevent tooth decay and to make sure the teeth are developing normally. Dentists can also detect and treat other problems of the teeth and gums.

What does it look like?

- You may see small pits or holes (“cavities”) on the surface of your child's teeth. However, cavities are difficult to see when they are very small. That's why regular dental checkups are so important: to detect tooth decay at an earlier, more treatable stage.
- Infants and toddlers sometimes develop severe decay of many teeth at once. This condition is sometimes called “baby bottle” tooth decay because it usually results from prolonged contact between sugary liquids (including milk) and the teeth. It is especially common in babies who are put to bed with a bottle of milk or juice.

What are some possible complications of tooth decay?

- If untreated, tooth decay can cause pain (toothaches), development of an abscess (localized area of infection), and destruction of your child's teeth. Childhood dental problems can be very painful as well as difficult and expensive to treat.
- If tooth decay causes a severe abscess of the primary teeth (“baby teeth”), it can cause problems with the way the permanent teeth come in.

What puts your child at risk of tooth decay?

- Not brushing the teeth and not visiting the dentist regularly.
- Eating or drinking a lot of sugary foods or liquids. This includes milk, if it's allowed to stay in contact with the teeth for a long time. Some special risk factors are:
 - Putting your baby or toddler to bed with a bottle of juice, milk, or other sugary liquid. The sugar stays in contact with your child's teeth for a longer time, promoting tooth decay. This can also happen in breast-fed babies, if they're allowed to use the breast as a “pacifier.”
 - Eating a lot of sticky sweets, especially hard candies.
- Acidic foods and liquids can also contribute to tooth decay.
- Low-income children and children from poor countries have higher rates of tooth decay. This may be related to eating behaviors and lack of dental hygiene.

Can tooth decay be prevented?

Yes. There are several things you can do to reduce your child's risk of tooth decay:

- Make sure that he or she gets enough fluoride. In many communities, fluoride is added to the drinking water. You can find out about fluoride in your community's water by calling your local health department. If your home has well water, it may need to be tested for fluoride. If the fluoride level is too high, staining of the teeth may occur. If the level is not high enough, your doctor or dentist may prescribe additional fluoride.
- Have your child brush regularly. Use a fluoride-containing toothpaste. Your child should brush at least twice daily, as soon as he or she is old enough to do so. Young children need supervision to make sure they brush well and don't swallow too much toothpaste. Don't put any more than a pea-sized amount of toothpaste on your child's toothbrush.
- Fluoride toothpaste is generally not used until your child is old enough to rinse out the mouth. For babies, simply wipe the teeth with a piece of gauze at least twice per day.
- Flossing. Older children should learn to floss the teeth every day.
- Visit the dentist regularly. Your child should go to the dentist when recommended, usually every 6 months for teeth-cleaning and examination.
- Don't put your baby or toddler to bed with a bottle, and don't let infants and toddlers use “sippy cups” for prolonged periods of time.

- Reduce your child's intake of sugary foods and drinks, especially sticky sweets. Have your child brush his or her teeth after eating these foods.

How is tooth decay treated?

- Fillings. If your child has tooth decay or cavities, the dentist can remove the infected areas and fill the cavity with special materials.
- Sealants. The dentist may recommend placing sealants to protect the surface of your child's teeth. These sealants are very effective in preventing cavities in the molar teeth.
- Other treatments. If tooth decay becomes severe or advanced, your dentist may recommend other treatments, including placing crowns (caps) on teeth, giving antibiotics, or performing surgery.

What are some other common dental problems in children?

Gum disease (gingivitis). Inflammation (swelling, redness) of the gums can occur, causing bleeding and bad breath. Like tooth decay, gum disease happens when your

child's teeth and mouth aren't kept clean. Proper brushing and flossing are usually all the treatment that is needed. Visits to the dentist are essential to treat and prevent gingivitis.

More advanced gum disease, called *periodontitis*, can cause tooth loss. This disease affects the periodontium, which includes not just the gums but also the bones that hold the teeth, ligaments, and other structures. Periodontitis is generally rare in children, unless they have other medical problems. However, it can sometimes occur in otherwise healthy children and teens.



When should I call your office?

Call our office if:

- You need help finding a dentist for your child.
- You have any questions about your child's dental care.
- You can't reach your dentist.

If your child has a toothache, call your dentist and visit as soon as possible. In the meantime, put an ice pack on the sore area.