

Tooth Decay Prevention

Definition

- Tooth decay destroys the enamel (hard part) of a tooth.
- When tooth decay causes a hole through the enamel, it's called a cavity.
- Early cavities look like white spots. More severe cavities look like a brown spot on the enamel surface.
- Fluoride and good oral health can prevent 90% of tooth decay.

Health Information

Tooth Decay Complications

- Toothache pain.
- Tooth abscess.
- Tooth loss.
- Missing school.
- Trouble sleeping with pain.
- Need for dental surgery.
- Malocclusion and later need for braces.

Importance of Fluoride

- Fluoride builds strong, decay-resistant enamel. Fluoride from all sources reduces cavities by 90%.
- Fluoride is recommended for all children over 6 months of age. It is critical during the first 16 years of life. Reason: these are the years when enamel formation occurs. Fluoride continues to provide benefits throughout our lifespan.
- Fluoride is safe. Over 70% of US tap water is fluoridated. Fluoride has been added to water supplies for more than 70 years.
- Drinking fluoridated water or taking a prescription fluoride supplement is the best protection against tooth decay.
- To get enough fluoride from drinking water, a child must drink at least 1 pint of fluoridated water each day. By school age a child should drink 1 quart of fluoridated water per day. If fluoride isn't added to your city's water supply, ask your healthcare provider for a prescription for fluoride drops or tablets during your next visit.
- Bottled water usually does not contain enough fluoride. Switch to tap water or take a fluoride supplement.

Baby Bottle Tooth Decay: Prevention

- Baby bottle tooth decay is the main type of tooth decay in toddlers.
- It's caused by excessive exposure to milk or juice in bottles or sippy cups.
- This happens when children are allowed to carry around a bottle or sleep with one.
- See the Baby Bottle Tooth Decay handout for details on prevention.

Care Advice

1. **Key Points**

- Tooth decay is the most common childhood chronic health problem.
- Good oral health needs to start when baby teeth erupt.
- Fluoride in water supplies and toothpaste has the greatest impact in preventing tooth decay.
- Here are ways to protect your child's teeth.

2. **Toothbrushing**

- The purpose of toothbrushing is to remove plaque from the teeth. Plaque is the invisible scum that forms on the tooth surface. Within this plaque, mouth bacteria change sugars to acids, which erodes the tooth enamel. This causes tooth decay and cavities.
- Twice daily toothbrushing should begin when the first tooth erupts.
- Help your child brush until at least 8 years old. Most children don't have the coordination to brush adequately before then. That means doing a final round of brushing after your child says they are done.
- If your child resists tooth-brushing, make the process more fun. Make up funny toothbrushing songs. Be creative.
- Try to brush after each meal, but especially after the last meal or snack of the day. Brush the teeth within the first 5 to 10 minutes after meals for the best result.
- If your child is in a setting where he can't brush his teeth, teach him to rinse his mouth with water after meals instead.
- Brush the molars (back teeth) carefully. Decay usually first starts in the pits and crevices in these teeth.

3. **Toothpaste**

- Fluoride toothpaste is beneficial at all ages.
- Start with an amount the size of a grain of rice.
- By age 3, increase to a pea-sized amount. That's all we need (even teens and adults).
- Discourage children from actively eating toothpaste. Swallowing small amounts during toothbrushing is harmless.

4. **Flossing**

- Dental flossing cleans between the teeth where a brush can't reach.
- Flossing should begin when your child's teeth start to touch.
- In the early years, most of the teeth have spaces between them.

5. **Tooth Friendly Diet**

- Top priority: don't let the sugar concentration in your child's mouth build up. Reason: sugar that stays in the mouth turns into acid, which damages enamel.
- Children who use milk, juice or other sweetened liquid for comforting are prone to severe tooth decay. This is called baby bottle tooth decay. It's completely preventable.
- Don't let your infant sleep with a bottle of milk or juice. If your baby must have a bottle at night, give her water instead. Better yet, put your child to bed after she has finished the bottle.
- Don't let your child carry around a bottle or sippy-cup during waking hours.
- Discourage your child from eating sugary foods that stick in the teeth, such as caramels or raisins. Other high risk foods are fruit roll-ups, dried fruit and gummy candy.
- Avoid frequent snacks and offer foods that contain sugar mainly with meals.
- Since it is hard to keep children away from candy completely, try to teach your child to brush after eating it.

6. **Dental Sealants**

- Dental sealants help protect the pits and crevices of the biting surfaces of the molars. Fluoride does little to prevent decay on these surfaces.
- A special plastic seal can be applied to the top surfaces of the permanent molars at about age 6.
- The seal may protect against decay for 10 to 20 years without needing replacement.
- Ask your child's dentist about the latest recommendations.

7. **Fluoride Varnish**

- Dentists can apply fluoride varnish to new teeth at the 1 year visit.
- Fluoride varnish can be applied 2 to 4 times per year until a child is 5 years old.
- Some pediatricians apply fluoride varnish in their office.

8. **Dentist Visits**

- The American Dental Association recommends that dental checkups begin by 1 year of age.
- See the dentist sooner for dental symptoms or teeth that look abnormal.

Call Your Doctor If

- Your child has a toothache
- You think your child needs to be seen
- You have other questions or concerns

Pediatric Care Advice

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