

# Caring for Your Child's Teeth

Almost 1 in 4 children in America will have a **cavity** (KA-vuh-dee) before turning 4 years of age! That's why it's very important for parents to know how to care for their children's teeth.

## Things You Can Do to Care for Your Child's Teeth

### Birth to 1 Year

- After feedings, gently brush your baby's gums and any baby teeth with water and a soft baby toothbrush. Or wipe them with a clean washcloth or gauze.
- After the first tooth comes in, ask your child's doctor if your child is getting enough **fluoride\***.
- Your child's doctor will check your baby's mouth at well-child visits. Babies at high risk for decay will be sent to a dentist.

### 1 Year to 2 Years

- Brush your child's teeth twice a day with water and a soft baby toothbrush. The best times are after breakfast and before bed. Start when your child has any teeth.
- Make sure your child doesn't drink more than a small cup of juice each day. Only drink juice at mealtime, not in between.
- Take your child for a dental checkup if your child has not had one yet.

### 2 Years to 6 Years

- Brush your child's teeth twice a day. Help your child brush. Or repeat the brushing after your child is done. Children this age need to learn to brush, but they can't really do a good job yet.
- Start using a fluoride toothpaste. Teach your child not to swallow it. Use only a pea-sized amount and smear the paste into the bristles. Too much fluoride can make white or brown spots on your child's adult teeth.
- Floss between any teeth that touch each other.
- Take your child for a dental checkup at least once a year.



### 6 Years and Up

- Have your child brush his or her teeth **twice a day** with fluoride toothpaste.
- Teach your child to floss every night after brushing.
- Take your child for a dental checkup at least once a year.

## What Else You Can Do

**Make sure your child has regular checkups with a dentist.** Your child's doctor will also look at your child's teeth and gums during well-child visits and help you find a dentist if the teeth have early tooth decay.

### **Make sure you have healthy teeth and gums.**

You can pass germs that cause cavities if you share food or drinks with your child.

**Don't share food or drinks with your child.** If you do you can pass germs that cause cavities and gum disease. You can also pass germs that cause cavities if you lick your child's spoon or pacifier.

**Call the dentist if you are worried about tooth decay and other problems.** If you don't have a dentist, call your child's doctor to help you find one. Only a dentist can treat tooth decay.

## Words to Know

**fluoride** (FLOR-eyed)—a natural chemical that helps teeth stay strong and helps prevent tooth decay. It hardens the outer coating on the teeth called enamel. Fluoride also helps repair early damage to teeth.

**permanent** (PUR-muh-nint)—lasting for a lifetime. Permanent teeth replace baby teeth one by one in your child's mouth. If your child loses a permanent tooth, it *won't* grow back.

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## What Is a Cavity?

An outer coating called enamel protects teeth. **Tooth decay** happens when germs in the mouth mix with sugar in foods and drinks. The germs then make acids that break down the enamel.

**Cavities** (KA-vuh-deez) are holes in the enamel caused by tooth decay.

Cavities may look like white or brown spots on the teeth. You might also see white lines on the teeth where they meet the gums.

Tooth decay in your baby's teeth used to be called baby bottle tooth decay, but is now called early childhood caries. **Caries** (KAIR-eez) is another word for tooth decay.

### *Eating and Tooth Decay*

#### **To help prevent tooth decay in your infant or child:**

- Don't put your child to bed with a bottle with anything other than water.
- Don't let your child suck on a bottle or sippy cup with anything other than water except at feeding times.
- Don't let your child eat sweet or sticky foods, like candy, cookies, or fruit roll-ups. There is sugar in foods like crackers and chips too. These are especially bad if your child snacks on them a lot. They should only be eaten at mealtime.
- Don't let your child sip drinks that have sugar and acid, like juices, sports drinks, flavored drinks, soda pop, or flavored teas.

## How Does My Child Get Fluoride?

Fluoride can be added to drinking water and toothpaste. Your water department can tell you if your tap water has fluoride. If your water comes from a well, get a fluoride water test. If needed, your dentist or child's doctor will give your child fluoride drops or pills to take every day, or may suggest you buy bottled water with fluoride. Your child may also get fluoride treatments (varnish or gel) at a medical or dental visit.

## Do Pacifiers or Thumb and Finger Sucking Hurt Teeth?

Sucking a pacifier, thumb, or fingers can affect the shape of the mouth, and how the top and bottom teeth line up. This is called your child's "bite."

It's OK if you give your baby a **pacifier**, but...

- Wait until your baby is 1 month old if you're breastfeeding.
- Do not dip the pacifier in any sweet liquid.
- Wash and replace the pacifier often.

If your child sucks his or her **thumb or fingers**...

- Your child's bite will most likely be OK if he or she stops sucking by 4 or 5 years of age. That's when the **permanent\*** teeth start coming in.
- Ask your child's dentist or doctor about how to help your child stop his or her sucking habits.

To learn more, visit the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) Web site at [www.aap.org](http://www.aap.org) or visit the American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry Web site at [www.aapd.org](http://www.aapd.org).

Your child's doctor or dentist will tell you to do what's best for your child. This information should not take the place of talking with your child's doctor or dentist.

We hope the resources in this handout are helpful. The AAP is not responsible for the information in these resources. We try to keep the information up to date but it may change at any time.

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