

Caring for babies' teeth

Looking after children's first teeth is important for their health and for strong, healthy second teeth.

Why are healthy first teeth so important?

- Babies with healthy teeth can eat foods with the nutrients they need to be healthy. Decayed teeth are painful and make it difficult to eat harder foods like fruit and vegetables which babies need for good health. The child may stop eating, or stay on soft foods for too long.
- Baby teeth help in the development of a child's speech
- They keep a space ready for when adult teeth are ready to come through. If baby teeth are removed due to tooth decay, the remaining teeth may move and take up space where the adult teeth are meant to come through. This can lead to teeth 'overcrowding' and the need for expensive treatment later.

When will a baby get its first teeth?

Teeth usually start appearing between three and 15 months of age. By the time children are two and half years old they should have all 20 of their baby teeth.

What's the best way to clean baby teeth?

At first, it's best to wipe the surfaces of the teeth with a clean face washer every day. You don't need toothpaste. After a year, use a soft baby brush (no toothpaste) to clean twice daily, if possible. If you can only clean teeth once a day, make sure it's before the baby goes to sleep at night. When the child is old enough to spit out (about two years old), you can use a little low fluoride toothpaste. Use just a smear of toothpaste for babies to begin with, gradually increasing the amount to about the size of a pea when the child is about six years old. Ask your chemist for a low fluoride toothpaste, or look for toothpaste with the words *low fluoride* on the pack.

How else can parents avoid decay in their babies' teeth?

- Avoid 'comfort' bottles, especially at night. The biggest cause of decay in children's teeth is putting them to bed with a bottle of juice or other sweet drink, or even milk. When children's teeth are bathed in these liquids for long periods it attracts bacteria which cause decay. Letting babies suck these bottles frequently through the day can also cause decay. It's okay for babies to have milk or a little juice at mealtimes, but between meals, and if a bottle is given at night, unsweetened, boiled water is best.
- Avoid giving babies and children sweet things to eat between meals (though something sweet at the end of a meal is okay).
- Keep your own teeth and gums healthy. Parents can pass on decay-causing bacteria from their own mouths when they kiss babies or taste their food.

How can parents tell if babies are teething?

Being irritable, dribbling and putting everything in their mouths are common signs. Gums may look red and swollen and feel hard. Chewing on something cold may help (keep a teething ring ready in the fridge). Being feverish may mean teething, but may also be a symptom of something else – if you're concerned, see your doctor or early childhood health nurse.

Will using a dummy (pacifier) affect children's teeth?

Sucking a dummy (or thumb) is okay before the age of three. It should be discouraged after that because it can push the upper front teeth forward.

When should a baby see a dentist?

At about two years old. It's a good way to spot any problems so they can be treated early. It also gets children used to the dentist.

If you need help making calls in English, ring the Translating and Interpreting Service (TIS) on 131 450.

You can find more health information in your language on the Multicultural Communication website at <http://mhcs.health.nsw.gov.au>.

Telephone numbers are correct at time of publication but are not continually updated. You may need to check the numbers in the telephone directory.