WHEN SHOULD YOU START CARING FOR YOUR CHILD'S TEETH?

Proper dental care begins even before a baby's first tooth appears. Remember that just because you can't see the teeth doesn't mean they aren't there. Teeth actually begin to form in the second trimester of pregnancy. At birth your baby has 20 primary teeth, some of which are fully developed in the jaw.

Running a damp washcloth over your baby's gums following feedings can prevent buildup of damaging bacteria. Once your child has a few teeth showing, you can brush them with a soft toothbrush for children or rub them with gauze at the end of the day.

Even babies can have problems with dental decay when parents do not practice good feeding habits at home. Putting your baby to sleep with a bottle in his or her mouth may be convenient in the short term – but it can harm the baby's teeth. When the sugars from juice or milk remain on a baby's teeth for hours, they may eat away at the enamel, creating a condition known as bottle mouth. Pocked, pitted, or discolored front teeth are signs of bottle mouth. Severe cases result in cavities and the need to pull all the front teeth until the permanent ones grow in. Parents and child care providers should also help young children develop set times for drinking milk during the day as well because sucking on a bottle throughout the day can be equally damaging to young teeth.

WHAT KIND OF DENTIST SHOULD MY CHILD SEE?

You may want to take your child to a dentist who specializes in treating kids. Pediatric dentists are trained to handle the wide range of issues associated with kids' dental health. They also know when to refer you to a different type of specialist such as an orthodontist to correct an overbite or an oral surgeon for jaw realignment. A pediatric dentist's primary goals are prevention, heading off potential oral health problems before they occur, and maintenance, ensuring through routine checkups and proper daily care that teeth and gums stay healthy.

HOW CAN I PREVENT CAVITIES?

The American Dental Association recommends that your child's first visit to the dentist take place by the first birthday. At this visit, the dentist will explain proper brushing and flossing techniques (you need to floss once your baby has two teeth that touch) and conduct a modified exam while your baby sits on your lap.

Such visits can help in the early detection of potential problems, and help kids become accustomed to visiting the dentist so they'll have less fear about going as they grow older.

When all of your child's primary teeth have come in (usually around age 2 ½ years) your dentist may start applying topical fluoride. Fluoride hardens the tooth enamel, helping to ward off the most common childhood oral disease, dental carries, or cavities. Cavities are caused by bacteria and food that are left on the teeth after eating. When these are not brushed away, acid collects on a tooth, softening its enamel until a hole – or cavity - forms.

Regular use of fluoride toughens the enamel, making it more difficult for acid to penetrate.

Although many municipalities require tap water to be fluoridated, other communities have no such regulations. If the water supply is not fluoridated, or if your family uses purified water, ask your dentist for fluoride supplements. Even though most toothpastes contain fluoride, toothpaste alone will not fully protect a child's mouth. Be careful, however, since too much fluoride can cause tooth discoloration. Check with your dentist before supplementing.

Discoloration can also occur as a result of prolonged use of antibiotics, as some children's medications contain a large amount of sugar. Parents should encourage children to brush after they take their medicine, particularly if the prescription will be long-term.

Brushing at least twice a day and routine flossing will help maintain a healthy mouth. Kids as young as age 2 or 3 can begin to use toothpaste when brushing, as long as they are supervised. Kids should not ingest large amounts of toothpaste – a pea-sized amount for toddlers is just right. Parents should always make sure the child spits the toothpaste out instead of swallowing.

As your child's permanent teeth grow in, the dentist can help seal out decay by applying a thin wash of resin to the back teeth, where most chewing occurs. Known as a sealant, this protective coating keeps bacteria from settling in the hard-to-reach crevices of the molars.

Although dental research has resulted in increasingly sophisticated preventative techniques, including fillings and sealants that seep fluoride, a dentist's care is only part of the equation. Fol-

low-up at home plays an equally important role. For example, sealants on the teeth do not mean that a child can eat sweets uncontrollably or slack off on the daily brushing and flossing – parents must work with kids to teach good oral health habits.

WHAT SHOULD I DO IF MY CHILD HAS A PROBLEM?

If you are prone to tooth decay or gum disease, your child may be at higher risk as well. Therefore, sometimes even the most diligent brushing and flossing will not prevent a cavity. Be sure to call your dentist if your child complains of tooth pain. The pain could be a sign of a cavity that needs to be treated.

New materials have given the pediatric dentist more filling and repair options than ever before. Silver remains the substance of choice for the majority of fillings in permanent teeth. Other materials, such as composite resins, also are gaining popularity. Composite resins bond to the teeth so the filling won't pop out, and they can be used to rebuild teeth damaged through injury or conditions such as cleft palate.

Tooth-colored resins are also more attractive. But in cases of fracture, extensive decay, or malformation of baby teeth, dentists often opt for stainless steel crowns. Crowns maintain the tooth while preventing the decay from spreading.

As kids grow older, their bite and the straightness of their teeth can become an issue Orthodontic treatment begins earlier now than it once did, but what once was a symbol of preteen anguish – a mouth filled with metal wires and braces – is a relic of the past. Kids as young as age seven now sport corrective appliances. Efficient, plastic-based materials have replaced old-fashioned metal contraptions. Dentists now understand that manipulation of teeth at a younger age can be easier and more effective in the long run. Younger children's teeth can be positioned with relatively minor orthodontia, thus preventing major orthodontia later on.

In some rare instances, usually when a more complicated dental procedure is to be performed, a dentist will recommend general anesthesia be used.

Parents should make sure that the professional who administers the medicine is a trained anesthesiologist or oral surgeon before agreeing to the procedure. Don't be afraid to question the dentist. Giving your child an early start on checkups and good dental hygiene is an effective way to help prevent this kind of extensive dental work. Encouraging your child to use a mouth guard during sports can also prevent serious dental injuries.

As your child grows, plan on routine dental checkups anywhere from once every 3 months to once a year, depending on the dentist's recommendations. Limiting intake of sugary foods and regular brushing and flossing all contribute to your child's dental health. Your partnership with the dentist will help ensure healthy teeth and a beautiful smile.

Information Courtesy: kidshealth.org

TEETH CARE

FOR YOUR CHILDREN

Some facts you need to know

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