

Prevention of Tooth Decay in Young Children

Primary or baby teeth are important for the healthy development of your child's permanent teeth. Since the enamel layer on baby teeth is much thinner and softer, tooth decay can progress rapidly. Estimates state that anywhere from 30 to 50 percent of 2 year olds average at least one cavity.

Tooth decay develops when acid-producing bacteria in a child's mouth begins to eat away at the soft tooth enamel. Any sugars in liquids or food left on teeth can promote this bacteria. Bottle-fed babies are at a high risk of tooth decay when they are put to bed with a bottle. Any sugary liquid such as milk, formula or juice will lead to decay if left on teeth for prolonged periods. Unrestricted, at-will drinking from a bottle or sippy cup is not recommended, as it can lead to tooth decay as soon as the first tooth appears.

While restricting your child's exposure to sugary drinks helps to prevent tooth decay, it's essential that parents also maintain a healthy mouth. Bacteria can be spread from parent or caregiver to baby by saliva. Testing food or cleaning off a pacifier in your mouth can spread your mouth's bacteria to your child.

Another important preventative is to teach your child to drink from a cup as early as possible, between 12 to 15 months. Liquid is less likely to form around and between teeth when drinking out of a cup as opposed to a bottle. It's also a good idea to limit milk or juices to meal time, and only offer water at night. Diluting juice to half water does not eliminate the sugary effect on teeth.

Many mothers believe that if they breastfeed, their baby can avoid tooth decay. However, whether bottle or breast fed, good oral hygiene, wiping or brushing 2 times a day, is still needed to avoid decay and keep your child's teeth healthy.

Even though you might be careful to avoid giving your child candies and cookies, be aware that acid producing sugars are also in cracker, chips, and even breads. Brushing twice a day with a fluoride toothpaste is recommended even for babies once the first tooth has erupted. A good home oral hygiene practice along with early and regular dental visits will help your child avoid cavities and maintain optimal oral health.