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PATIENT EDUCATION CENTER

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Baby Bottle Tooth Decay (Early Childhood Caries)

Did you know that keeping your child's baby teeth healthy is important for chewing, speaking and appearance? That's because a baby's teeth are at risk for decay (caries) as soon as they appear. The good news is that it's easy to prevent Early Childhood Caries and keep baby teeth healthy.

What causes tooth decay?

Bacteria in the mouth change the sugar in foods and drinks into acid that attacks the teeth. Each time you eat or drink, acid can attack the teeth for 20 minutes or longer. After many attacks, tooth decay can develop.

What is Early Childhood Caries?

Early Childhood Caries is tooth decay in the primary (baby) teeth of young children. It happens when the child's teeth are around sugary liquids often and for long periods of time. Such liquids include fruit juice, soda and other sweetened liquids.

Tooth decay can begin as soon as a baby's teeth come in, usually by age six months or so. Decay in baby teeth can cause pain. If decay is not treated, it can destroy the teeth of an infant or young child. And if a child has decay in the primary teeth, he or she is more likely to have decay in the permanent (adult) teeth as well. That's why it's just as important to take care of baby teeth as permanent teeth.

1. Healthy baby teeth

2. Moderate decay

3. Moderate to severe decay

4. Severe decay

Sipping habits

Frequent snacks in between meals expose teeth to repeated acid attacks. So do frequent sips of sugary beverages. Do not let your child constantly sip on liquids containing sugar (including milk and juice drinks). If your child needs a between-meal snack, choose healthy foods.

Infants should not be allowed to fall asleep while breastfeeding or with a bottle because the sugary liquid can pool around the teeth. Never dip pacifiers in a sweet liquid or add sugar to your baby's food to make it taste better.

Offer sugary liquids only at controlled times. If your child is thirsty between snacks or meals, offer water in the cup.

Keeping Your Child's Mouth Clean

After each feeding, wipe the baby's gums with a clean, damp gauze pad or washcloth. This will help remove plaque and bits of food that can harm new teeth. When your child's teeth begin to erupt, or push through the gums, brush them gently with a child's size toothbrush. Talk to your dentist or physician about using fluoride toothpaste for children under 2 years.

When your child can be counted on not to swallow toothpaste (around age two), begin brushing the teeth with fluoride toothpaste. The ADA recommends a pea-sized amount.

Teaching your child good oral hygiene habits early can lead to a lifetime of good dental health.

Baby's First Visit

Talk to a dentist about scheduling your child's first dental visit. It is a good idea for your child's first dental visit to occur within six months after the first tooth erupts, but no later than the first birthday. Although this may seem early, a dentist can show you how to properly clean your child's teeth, check for problems such as dental decay, and offer advice on your child's diet and pacifier use. You should consider this a well-baby dental checkup for your child.

Having a well-baby checkup at this age connects your child to a dental home. This is a "home base" for dental care, a place where you can take your child from year to year. This helps the dentist get to know your child's and your family's specific needs, so he or she can provide the best care.

More tips for healthy teeth

• Always rinse pacifiers with water. Do not clean a child's pacifier with your own mouth. If you do, the decay-causing bacteria that might be in your saliva can be passed to your child.

• Encourage your child to drink from a cup by the first birthday.

• Children should receive the ideal level of fluoride to help prevent tooth decay. Most people live in places that have fluoride in the tap water, but fluoride can also come from other sources. Ask your child's dentist about how your child can get the right amount of fluoride.