

Tooth decay remains one of the most common diseases of childhood. The first step in preventing dental decay is to screen children to identify those who are at risk. The American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry (AAPD) recommends that children be examined by a dentist when they are a year old, or within 6 months of the eruption of the first tooth.

**This brochure includes information on dental development, dental care for babies, nutrition and feeding, and dental behaviors and safety concerns.**

#### **When do baby teeth come in?**

A child's primary teeth, sometimes called "baby teeth," are as important as the permanent adult teeth. Primary teeth often begin to appear when infants are 6 months old, and help them chew and speak. The first baby tooth to erupt is the lower primary central incisor.

#### **Teething**

The eruption of baby teeth begins when other changes in an infant's immune system, growth, and development are also occurring. The eruption of the primary teeth usually begins around 6 months of age. This is, coincidentally, when infants have lost most of their maternally-derived antibody protection. By the age of 6 months, the number of maternal antibodies has decreased to a very low level, predisposing an infant to a variety of infections.

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Drooling in infants reaches its maximum level just before tooth eruption. This is because in early infancy, the ability to swallow all of the saliva is not yet well-developed. Putting objects in the mouth, and biting them, also first occurs at the time of teething. This newly acquired ability to "mouth" objects is simply part of the normal neurological development of a child.

#### **What can be done about teething pain?**

- \* Have two clean teething rings, which have been chilled, ready for the baby to chew on.
- \* Give children's Tylenol elixir, as needed, to alleviate pain and inflammation.
- \* Note that using benzocaine ointment on baby's gums may not be a good idea because: Benzocaine ointment may sensitize your baby to future related allergic reactions. The ointment may cause numbing of the throat and your baby may choke if too much is used.

#### **Brushing Baby Teeth**

Oral hygiene techniques may be modified depending on a child's age. For small infants, the gums need to be cleaned once or twice daily with a piece of clean gauze. Infants should be introduced to the toothbrush around the age of one. A baby tooth cleanser should be used up to the age of 3. After the age of 3, a pea-sized drop of children's toothpaste can be applied to the toddler's toothbrush.

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Brushing baby teeth can be quite a challenge for new parents. Some infants and toddlers may refuse to let parents brush their teeth. What can parents do? Parents can experiment with various rewards for good behavior during brushing. The initial tooth brushing attempts need to last only 5 seconds or so - and some little reward should be provided immediately thereafter. The time spent brushing the teeth can be gradually increased later on. Using this "rewards technique," parents can follow the first successful attempt at tooth brushing with letting their baby "play with a favorite toy" or "play a favorite game with mom or dad."

#### **What is Early Childhood Caries?**

Early Childhood Caries (ECC) is a multifactorial disease which affects children worldwide. It is an aggressive oral disease which can occur in children up to the age of three. It initially affects the upper front teeth, and eventually spreads to the primary first molars. This new term, ECC, encompasses baby bottle tooth decay, nursing caries, rampant caries, sippy cup caries and caries related to consumption of soft drinks. An infant's mouth contains millions of bacteria. These bacteria are the initiators of the caries disease process. When a parent puts the baby's feeding spoon into his or her mouth, bacteria from the parent's mouth will be transferred back to the baby's mouth and infect the baby's teeth.

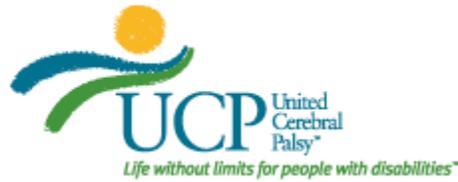
This process can take place as early as eleven months of age. The danger of infecting the infant's teeth is increased when the mother already has the caries disease herself. Factors affecting the occurrence and severity of ECC include: diet and nutrition, oral hygiene, fluoridation, preventive dental measures, transmission of cariogenic microbes from mother to child, a child's genetic susceptibility to dental disease, salivary flow, mucosal immunity, lifestyle, and history of previous dental caries.

### How can parents identify dental caries?

1. The first sign of dental caries is a white spot "lesion" on the enamel surface of the front teeth. These are white, chalky areas, close to the gum line. These decalcifications are caused by bacterial acid, and directly precede irreversible loss of tooth structure (a cavity).
2. Parents should get these areas examined by a dentist as soon as possible, so that treatment can be initiated, if necessary. The white spot lesions can be "reversed" (remineralized) by the application of fluoride - if the problem is recognized early enough.
3. Active cavities usually have a golden-brown color.

### How can parents prevent dental caries?

- \* Parents should not put children to sleep with a bottle containing any liquid other than water. Parents should encourage their infants to begin drinking from a cup around their first birthday.
- \* Parents should help brush their children's teeth every day, after every meal.
- \* Parents should not let their children drink fruit juice or sweetened drinks from a bottle or "sippy" cup since this prolongs the exposure of teeth to harmful sugar.
- \* Parents should provide healthy, balanced meals for children. They should limit the amount of sugar-laden foods and snacks in their diet.



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# Dental Health Care And Development in the Young Child



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