

**CHILDREN'S HEALTHY SMILES BEGIN WITH HEALTHY HABITS, PART I**  
**BY DR. RICHARD HASTREITER**  
*Dental Director, Delta Dental of Minnesota*

There are few sights more delightful than a child's smile. Ensuring that your child maintains a healthy smile will depend primarily on the personal habits they develop – starting at a very young age. *This is the first in a series of tips and practices that can help you and your child achieve this goal.*

Educating parents and children about the importance of oral health and the prevention of oral diseases, rather than treatment after the fact, is critical to creating a lifetime of healthy smiles. Attitudes and habits established at an early age can last a lifetime. Tooth decay (also known as dental caries) is still one of the most preventable childhood diseases, yet it occurs five times more often than asthma and seven times more often than hay fever.

**Tooth decay is contagious**

Tooth decay is an infectious, transmissible disease that can spread from parents and caregivers to babies. Although babies are not born with decay-causing bacteria in their mouths, many unsuspecting parents (especially mothers) and caregivers pass these bacteria onto their children. Once tooth decay-causing bacteria take up residence in the mouth, sugars from foods and beverages are converted into acids that attack and destroy tooth enamel - producing cavities.

Tooth decay-causing bacteria are transmitted to children from parents and caregivers. These bacteria can spread easily through common behaviors such as:

- Sharing a feeding spoon or other utensils when tasting a baby's food
- Pre-chewing a baby's food
- "Cleaning" a baby's pacifier or the nipple of the baby's bottle by putting it in the parent or caregiver's mouth
- Testing the temperature of a baby's bottle by mouth
- Allowing a baby to put hands into a parent or caregiver's mouth and then into his/her own mouth
- Sharing cups and toothbrushes
- Kissing when there is saliva transfer

Tooth decay in children is a preventable health condition that can occur as soon as teeth erupt, if children have been exposed to decay-causing bacteria. Children most susceptible to tooth decay are those who acquire decay-causing bacteria early in life. The higher the levels of decay-causing bacteria in the parent or caregiver's mouth, the more likely the child will become infected. Research has shown that children have a reduced risk of developing tooth decay if their mothers have had good oral health.

**Tips to prevent tooth decay:**

- Avoid behaviors that can transfer saliva from adult to children.
- The American Dental Association (ADA) recommends that a child be seen by a dentist as soon as his/her first tooth erupts, but no later than the child's first birthday.
- Eat a nutritious, healthy diet and limit snacks.
- Brush teeth twice a day with fluoride toothpaste. Parents and caregivers of children should follow the directions on the label of fluoride toothpaste that has the ADA Seal of Acceptance. Parents and caregivers should consult a dentist or other health-care provider before introducing a child under two years old to fluoride toothpaste. For children under the age of six who use fluoride toothpaste, place no more than a pea-sized amount of toothpaste on the toothbrush, help brush the child's teeth (recommended particularly for preschool-aged children) or supervise the toothbrushing, and encourage the child to spit excess toothpaste into the sink to minimize the amount swallowed. Indiscriminate use can result in inadvertent swallowing of more fluoride than is recommended.
- Flossing teeth daily should begin when any two teeth are touching each other.
- Drink fluoridated water after meals to help cleanse the teeth.
- Visit the dentist regularly.

Since tooth decay is preventable, educating parents and children about the importance of oral health and the prevention of oral diseases is the key to creating a lifetime of healthy smiles. Taking a role in preventing tooth decay not only makes sense from a health standpoint, it is also much more cost effective. Remember to brush and floss daily, eat a healthy diet and see a dentist regularly. Attitudes and habits established at an early age can last a lifetime.

To learn more, visit the Oral Health & Wellness section of Delta Dental of Minnesota's Web site at [www.deltadentalmn.org](http://www.deltadentalmn.org).

## CHILDREN'S HEALTHY SMILES BEGIN WITH HEALTHY HABITS, PART II

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There are few sights more delightful than a child's smile. Ensuring that your child maintains a healthy smile will depend primarily on the personal habits they develop – starting at a very young age. *This is the second in a series of tips and practices that can help you and your child achieve this goal.*

Babies go through many changes in their first year of life. Many of these developments, such as learning to sit up or crawl, are a joy for parents to witness. However, a baby's first tooth is an important milestone that may come with some mixed emotions from both parent and child.

### **Teething Can Be Unpleasant**

Baby teeth, also called primary teeth, usually start to appear between the ages of six months and one year. As the new teeth erupt, babies may have sore or tender gums that can cause them to be irritable and fussy. Babies may experience other unpleasant symptoms such as loss of appetite, sleeplessness and excessive drooling. While teething, it is not normal for a baby to have diarrhea, a fever or a rash. According to the American Dental Association, if you notice your teething baby has fever, diarrhea or continues to be cranky and uncomfortable, you should call your physician.

### **When Will the Teeth Appear?**

Newborn babies typically have a partially developed set of teeth that are not yet visible. Parents will usually start to see their baby's first teeth erupt around six or seven months of age.

### **The Importance of Baby (Primary) Teeth**

Although the process of teething can be a bit unpleasant, those tiny new teeth can play an important role in your baby's healthy development. Even though they eventually fall out and are replaced, baby teeth can be just as important as adult permanent teeth.

Primary teeth help children chew their food and speak properly. Healthy baby teeth also help keep a space in the jaw for the emergence of permanent adult teeth. If a baby tooth is lost too early, crowding and misalignment may occur when it is time for the adult teeth to emerge. This could result in crooked teeth and could require more complicated or expensive treatment as your child gets older.

### **Keep Those New Teeth Healthy**

Baby teeth are susceptible to decay as soon as they appear, so special care should be taken to keep them healthy. Tooth decay that occurs in infants is usually called baby bottle tooth decay or early childhood caries. This occurs when baby teeth are frequently exposed to liquids containing sugar. Among these liquids are milk, formula, fruit juice, sodas and other sweetened drinks. An increased risk of tooth decay is also associated with unrestricted, on demand nocturnal breastfeeding after eruption of the child's first tooth, and with use of pacifiers that are frequently dipped in honey, sugar or syrup. When children are allowed to drink sugary liquids from a bottle or sippy cup, the sugars can pool around the teeth and gums and feed the bacteria that cause decay. Do not allow a child to fall asleep with a bottle containing sugary liquids. Unfortunately, by the time a parent notices signs of decay in baby teeth, it may be too late to save the teeth.

Although teething can be a trying phase of your baby's life, it is the first step toward a beautiful smile that can bring joy for years to come. Parents can use baby teeth as a way to start teaching young children about good oral health that will give children healthy smiles for a lifetime. Remember to brush and floss daily, eat a healthy diet and see a dentist regularly. Attitudes and habits established at an early age can last a lifetime.

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## CHILDREN'S HEALTHY SMILES BEGIN WITH HEALTHY HABITS, PART III

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Since tooth decay (also known as dental caries) is preventable, educating parents and children about the importance of oral health and the prevention of oral diseases is the key to creating a lifetime of healthy smiles. Taking a role in preventing tooth decay, rather than treatment after the fact, not only makes sense from a health standpoint, it is also much more cost effective. Attitudes and habits established at an early age can last a lifetime.

### **Tooth brushing**

Proper brushing and flossing techniques are an essential part of maintaining good oral health and preventing gum disease. Daily brushing helps remove decay-causing plaque from tooth surfaces. You will need to help your child finish brushing until she is about 6-7 years old. Toothbrushes come with just about every imaginable variation: tapered heads, boxy heads, angled heads, neon handles, handles with bending rubber, handles with your kid's favorite cartoon character, etc. How to choose what's best for you and your child?

- Choose a toothbrush with a small head and soft bristles that has the American Dental Association (ADA) Seal of Acceptance. Stiff or sharp bristles can injure gums and wear down tooth enamel.
- Choose a size and shape that is comfortable and reaches the surface of every tooth. A small, compact head works best to get to those hard to reach places.
- Replace the toothbrush when the bristles bend or look worn — about every three to four months. Children's brushes may have to be replaced more often.

### **Toothpaste**

Be careful in selecting toothpaste that is not too abrasive, because while tooth enamel is the hardest substance in the body, abrasive toothpaste may wear down tooth enamel. Parents and caregivers of children should follow the directions on the label of fluoride toothpaste that has the ADA Seal of Acceptance. Consult a dentist or other health-care provider before introducing a child under the age of two to fluoride toothpaste. For children under the age of six who use fluoride toothpaste, place no more than a pea-sized amount of toothpaste on the toothbrush, help brush the child's teeth (recommended particularly for preschool-aged children) or supervise the toothbrushing, and encourage the child to spit excess toothpaste into the sink to minimize the amount swallowed. Indiscriminate use can result in inadvertent swallowing of more fluoride than is recommended.

### **Flossing**

For children, flossing should begin when any two teeth are touching each other. Dental floss should be used to floss between teeth once a day. It is important to floss between all teeth in the mouth. Start in the same place each time and work around the mouth. Parents can help floss children's teeth until they are able to floss by themselves.

### **Sealants**

A sealant is a plastic film-like material that is applied to the chewing surfaces of the back teeth. Because sealants act as a physical barrier to decay causing bacteria, sealants are nearly 100% effective in protecting teeth from cavities in pits and fissures if applied properly and maintained. Sealants are most often recommended for children who have newly erupted permanent teeth. (First and second permanent molars erupt into the mouth at about ages 6 and 12 years.) Having sealants applied to teeth shortly after they erupt protects them from developing cavities in areas that are difficult to clean. The procedure is simple and fast with very little, if any, discomfort.

### **Lift the Lip**

Tooth decay can occur as soon as the teeth erupt through the gums into the mouth. Parents and caregivers can take one simple step each month and "lift the lip" to look in your child's mouth for signs of tooth decay and other oral health problems.

Look for things such as:

- ✓ Changes in tooth color
- ✓ Holes on the tooth surface
- ✓ Broken or chipped teeth
- ✓ Swollen or bleeding gums
- ✓ Color changes in the soft tissue areas of the mouth
- ✓ A sore or lump on the lip or in the mouth
- ✓ A change in bite

If you notice any of these signs, report it to your dentist.

Prevention is the key to keeping your child's mouth and teeth healthy. Be sure your child is brushing with fluoride toothpaste if appropriate, and flossing daily, eating healthy foods, and visiting the dentist regularly. Ask your dentist if your child would benefit from the added protection of dental sealants. Attitudes and habits established at an early age can last a lifetime.

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