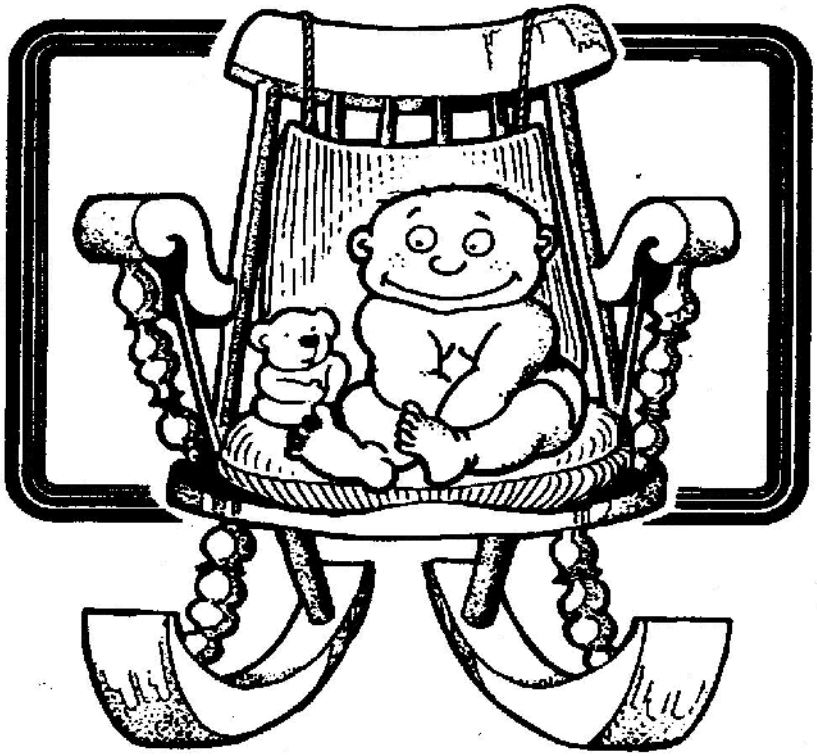
Parent's Guide to Infant Oral Care

Prepared by Monica Jungbluth, D.D.S., M.S.



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George A. Hankerson, D.D.S.
Brent R. Kvittem, D.D.S.

Savage Location:
7629 Egan Drive
Savage, MN 55378
Phone: (952) 440-5100
Fax: (952) 440-5140

Lakeville Location:
17510 Dodd Boulevard
Lakeville, MN 55044
Phone: (952) 997-7100
Fax: (952) 997-2017

www.childrensdentalc.com

Why is it important to keep the primary teeth healthy?

1. Hold space for permanent teeth and guide permanent teeth into position.
2. Proper chewing.
3. Prevent spread of infection from decayed teeth to the rest of the body.
4. Prevent discomfort from infected teeth.
5. Attractive appearance.
6. Good speech.

When will the primary teeth appear?

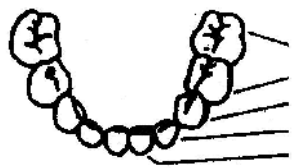
The primary teeth begin to form as early as the sixth week of fetal life. By the fourth month of pregnancy, the teeth have begun to calcify. In the twelfth week of fetal life, the permanent teeth begin to form. Most of the calcification of the permanent teeth occurs from birth to about eight years of age.

The following chart shows the average age of appearance of the primary teeth. There is considerable variation among children in the ages of eruption of the primary teeth. Each child is different and there is little significance to early or late eruption. By age 2½ years, a child generally will have all 20 primary teeth. The first permanent molars will be the next teeth to erupt at age 6-7 years and they will appear behind the last primary molars.

Primary Teeth

Upper Teeth

Central Incisor	8-12 months
Lateral Incisor	9-13 months
Cuspid	26-22 months
First Molar	13-19 months
Second Molar	25-33 months



Lower Teeth

Second Molar	23-31 months
First Molar	24-18 months
Cuspid	17-23 months
Lateral Incisor	10-16 months
Central incisor	6-10 months

What is dental plaque?

Plaque is the white or nearly colorless film that continuously forms on teeth. It consists of a sticky mass of oral bacteria that are present even in a healthy mouth. These bacteria react with the sugar from foods to produce acids that attack the hard outer layer (enamel) of the tooth.

What is dental decay (caries)?

food (sugar) + oral bacteria = plaque (acid)
acid + susceptible tooth = tooth decay

Dental decay is not just a hole in a tooth, it is an active infection. Decay is irreversible; the lost tooth will never grow back. Once decay starts, it will continue if untreated. Dental decay is largely preventable.

How can dental decay be prevented?

1. *Fluoride*
   Children in areas with optimally fluoridated water have up to 65% less decay. Fluorides strengthen the tooth enamel against decay. If a child is in a nonfluoridated area or if the child is entirely breastfed, a prescription for fluoride supplements (tablets, drops, gels) can be obtained from a dentist or a physician.
2. *Diet*
   Sugar is a major cause of dental decay. A child should receive a balanced diet, avoiding excessive sweets, especially as snacks.
3. *Professional dental care*
4. *Oral hygiene*

When should I take my child to the dentist for the first visit?

Fifty percent of two-year-old children have one or more decayed teeth. As soon as the first primary tooth erupts into an infant's mouth, it is susceptible to decay.

Ideally, the first dental visit would be around the time of eruption of the first primary tooth, i.e. about 6 months of age. At that time, the dentist has the chance to help parents keep their child's teeth and mouth healthy. Dental problems can thus be prevented or detected early when they are the easiest and the least costly to treat.

This is a time in your child's life when many preventive measures are being provided (eg. immunizations) as a part of regular medical exams. Preventive dental visits should be a part of your child's health care.

How should I clean my baby's mouth?

Parents should not hesitate to inspect and clean their child's mouth regularly. The infant's objection to these procedures should not prevent you from carrying out your responsibility to your child's health. A pocket flashlight may prove helpful for better vision.

The goal of cleaning an infant's mouth is not only to remove food debris, but more importantly to remove harmful plaque from every tooth surface and from the gum pads.

Ideally, the parent should conduct a cleaning after each feeding and once thoroughly before bedtime.

Before any teeth appear, the gum pads should be cleaned with gauze (2" x 2") which is held between the thumb and forefinger.

After teeth appear, the parent retains full responsibility for the cleanings until the child is 8-9 years old, after which time the parent should supervise the child's own cleanings. When teeth begin to appear, a small, soft-bristle toothbrush can be used to clean the teeth while still using gauze for the gum pads. The bristles of the brush are pointed toward the gum line and a short, gentle, scrubbing motion is used to clean the teeth. The inside, outside, and chewing surfaces of the teeth are brushed. A small amount of fluoridated toothpaste may be used if desired.

When cleaning your infant's mouth, have the child's head in your lap with the feet pointing away from you. The cleaning takes only about one minute.

Floss should be used whenever a tooth has contact with one next to it. This area between the teeth cannot be cleaned by a brush. Use a "sawing" motion to get floss between the teeth; never "snap" into the gums. Press against the side of the tooth and scrape the floss up and down to remove the plaque.

What is "Nursing Bottle Syndrome" ?

Nursing Bottle Syndrome is a condition of widespread dental caries in young children who have the inappropriate habit of sucking on a nursing bottle containing milk or fluids other than water when going to sleep. Only plain water should be used in the bottle - **not** milk, formula, sugar water, Jell-o water, Kool-Aid, honey, fruit juices, vitamin supplements, syrups, Hi-C, soft drinks, etc.

As the child sleeps, the rates of swallowing and salivary flow decrease and the liquid forms a sugar pool in the mouth which is readily attacked by the oral bacteria to produce acid. The child's tongue protects the lower incisors, so these are commonly the only teeth that are spared the ravages of decay.

Besides the sweetened bedtime bottle, there are other inappropriate feeding habits that can result in a similar pattern of extensive decay:

1. Using a sweetened bottle as a pacifier for prolonged periods of time during the day.
2. Dipping a pacifier in sweetened liquid.
3. Allowing a child to fall asleep for long periods of time when breastfeeding.

Children affected by Nursing Bottle Syndrome are as young as 1-2 years of age. The treatment is often difficult, costly, and time-consuming. If the condition is not treated early enough, the damaged teeth will be impossible to restore and there will be no choice but to remove them.