

FOCUS

ON DENTAL HYGIENE

HEALTHY HABITS: A SILENT EDUCATION

Kids look to adults for guidance. They see the decisions we make — the food we eat, how much value we place on dental hygiene, the relationship we have with our dentist, the products we choose to trust — and follow our lead. February is National Children's Dental Health Month, making now the ideal time to demonstrate the importance of proper daily oral care. (For those whose "children" are furry and four-legged, you're not off the hook: this is also National Pet Dental Health Month.) Stay positive and teach the kids in your life to brighten their smile with a smile of your own.

5 Answers to Commonly Asked Questions About Children's Oral Health

1. How early should I bring my child in for his/her first dental visit?

According to the American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry (AAPD), the first visit should occur shortly after the first tooth appears. This first tooth is just the beginning in a set of primary or baby teeth your child will have. Maintaining optimum health for the first set of teeth is critical and serves to: aid in speech development and proper chewing habits; promote better digestion and nutrition and help maintain space until the permanent teeth are ready to emerge. Getting an early start in dental care is the key to healthy teeth and establishing good oral health habits that will remain with your child for a lifetime. The first visit is essential for evaluating the soft tissues of the mouth, as well as examining the teeth for any early signs of decay. The dentist can review the latest information and make recommendations for pediatric care with regard to diet and fluoride, and how to avoid injuries or trauma to the mouth.

2. What can I do to prevent cavities in my child's teeth?

There are several primary factors that aid in the prevention of tooth decay:

- implement at-home oral hygiene practices, which include brushing with a fluoridated toothpaste twice a day and flossing once a day
- limit snacking on sugary foods and drinks and fermentable carbohydrates such as crackers, chips and breads
- maintain regular dental check-ups
- have sealants (protective coatings) placed on the teeth when advised

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Additional steps that can be taken to prevent early childhood tooth decay include:

- avoid allowing a bottle-fed baby to go to sleep with a bottle unless it contains only water (milk pools around the teeth and creates an acid bath that weakens the enamel)
- wipe the baby's gums and teeth with a damp washcloth following breast or bottle feeding
- maintain meticulous oral hygiene and make regular dental visits to avoid the transmission of bacteria that may be harmful.

3. How do I get my child to brush at bedtime?

The earlier you begin a daily routine for cleaning teeth the quicker this process will become a natural part of your child's routine. Bedtime brushing should never be a struggle or cause anger. This should be a fun and easy way to educate your children about the importance of good oral hygiene. Children watch their parents closely with everything they learn and brushing is no different. Set a good example and model the behavior you wish to see in your children when it comes to daily oral health. Often times, this can become a family routine performed together. Very small children lack the dexterity to brush properly, and need your support early on. Once they become more adept, introduce electric or unique toothbrushes that are fun and encourage brushing. Floss holders, tongue cleaners and disclosing tablets educate your child and enroll them in the process of being independent and responsible for their oral health.

4. Do I need to give my child fluoride supplements?

There are many sources from which your child may be getting fluoride. These include fruit juices, fluoridated water, fluoridated toothpaste and fluoride treatments during their dental visits. Fluoride supplementation is not as common as it was years ago, mainly due to the concern with over fluoridation. Supplementation should be advised and supervised by both your pediatrician and your pediatric dentist. All your options should be fully discussed and questions answered to make an informed decision.

5. What is the difference between a pediatric dentist and a general dentist?

Pediatric dentists are often considered the "pediatricians of dentistry." It is the specialty in dentistry that focuses on the dental care and attention of infants and small children through adolescence. This also includes children with special needs. Pediatrics requires two to three years of specialized training following a standard dental program. This prepares the pediatric dentist for the unique needs and care many children often require. Making the initial exposure to the dentist for a child can often be overwhelming. It is wise to be delicate in this process to ensure your child has a positive and rewarding experience. Pediatric dentists have the benefit of creating an office environment that is designed specifically with children in mind. A pediatric dental office is colorful, fun and usually theme-oriented around children's interests. These offices truly cater to children in a way that provides them the best experience possible.

CLOSING THOUGHTS

The oral health of our children should be a year-round concern, but it never hurts to get a reminder. Use National Children's Dental Health Month as the catalyst for changing the way your kids think about their teeth!

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