

Top 10 Frequently Asked Questions

1. Can babies get tooth decay (cavities)?

Yes. Teeth are at risk for tooth decay (cavities) as soon as they appear in the mouth. It is important to keep your baby's teeth and gums clean and healthy to prevent tooth decay. If tooth decay is found early, it is easier to treat. Early prevention is the best way to protect your child from oral disease.

2. Can my oral health affect my child's oral health?

Yes. Babies do not have the germs that cause tooth decay when they are born. They get germs from parents and other intimate caregivers. Keeping your mouth healthy leaves fewer germs to pass to your baby. The better your oral health is, the better your child's oral health will be.

3. What is "baby bottle" tooth decay?

Tooth decay in infants and children is known as Early Childhood Dental Caries (ECC), or "baby bottle" tooth decay. In children under 3 years of age, it most often occurs in the upper front teeth, but other teeth may also be affected.

4. What causes baby bottle tooth decay?

Baby bottle tooth decay occurs when a baby's teeth are exposed to sweet liquids for long periods of time. Allowing your baby to nurse throughout the night or giving them a bottle while they sleep is the main cause. The decay occurs when milk, formula, juice, and other sweetened liquids are left clinging to the teeth all night, providing a source of food to cavity-causing germs. The longer this continues, the worse the damage, making it very expensive to treat.

5. How can I prevent baby bottle tooth decay?

To prevent tooth decay, never allow your child to fall asleep with a bottle containing milk, formula, fruit juice or sweet liquids. If your baby wants a bottle at bedtime or during naps, give them a pacifier or a bottle filled with cool water. If you use a pacifier, use a clean one. Never give a baby a pacifier dipped in sugar or honey.

6. Do I need to clean my baby's mouth if there are no teeth yet?

Yes. Starting at birth, clean your baby's gums everyday using water and a clean, damp, soft washcloth or infant toothbrush, especially after every feeding. You are forming health habits for your children that will last a lifetime, and your baby will grow accustomed to having a clean and healthy mouth.

7. What do I do once teeth begin to appear?

As soon as your baby's teeth start to show, begin gently brushing them with a soft infant toothbrush and water. Toothpaste should not be used until age 2 unless your dentist recommends it. When the teeth start to touch each other, begin flossing between them daily. Practicing good oral hygiene with your child will help prevent oral disease.

8. Do baby teeth really matter? Won't they just fall out anyway?

Yes. Primary, or "baby," teeth are crucial for an infant who will soon be chewing food and talking. Healthy baby teeth help children speak clearly, chew naturally, and have a bright, beautiful smile! They are also placeholders for adult teeth, many of which may not come in for 10 to 12 years. If there is tooth decay in baby teeth, it can easily spread to permanent teeth when the child grows up.

9. When should I take my child to the dentist for the first time? How often?

You should take your baby to the dentist no later than their first birthday for a preventive check-up and take them once every six months after that. The dentist will evaluate your baby's risk for tooth decay and answer any questions you have about brushing, flossing, and proper feeding practices. Good, consistent early dental visits will help your baby grow up to be comfortable at dental visits.

10. Besides cleaning and brushing my baby's teeth, what else can I do?

Check your baby's teeth often -- at least once a month. Lift the lip and look for white spots on the teeth or changes to the gums. If you notice anything unusual, see a dentist immediately.