
Toothbrushing - children

Summary

- Start cleaning your baby's teeth as soon as they come through, either with a soft cloth or a child's soft toothbrush.
- A small pea-sized amount of children's toothpaste (low fluoride) can be used from 18 months of age.
- Brush your child's teeth and along the gum line twice a day.
- You will need to help your child brush their teeth until they can do it themselves (usually about eight years old).

Regular toothbrushing is important for both children and adults. It helps to remove the bacteria and plaque that cause tooth decay and gum disease. It is recommended that everybody brush their teeth twice a day – in the morning and before going to bed at night.

It's good for children to start having their teeth brushed early so that they see tooth brushing as part of their daily routine. Children will need help and encouragement to develop this new skill.

When to begin brushing your child's teeth

Start brushing your child's teeth as soon as the first tooth comes through, usually at around six months of age. Clean your baby's teeth with a soft wet cloth, or a small soft toothbrush with water.

Clean all surfaces of the teeth and gums twice a day: in the morning and before bed at night. Baby teeth help children to eat and speak, and guide the permanent adult teeth into position, so it is important to take care of them right from the start.

Choosing the right brush and toothpaste for your child

Choose a toothbrush that is designed for children. It should have a small head and soft bristles.

When choosing the right toothpaste, remember:

- for children 0–18 months of age – use only water, no toothpaste
- from 18 months until the child turns six years old – use a small pea-sized amount of low fluoride children's toothpaste (check on the pack)
- from six years of age – use a pea-sized amount of standard fluoride toothpaste.

For children who do not have access to fluoridated water, or who have a greater risk of tooth decay for other reasons, guidelines about toothpaste use may vary. Ask your dentist or other oral health professional for more information.

Young children need help brushing their teeth

Tips to help clean your child's teeth include:

- Sit your child on your lap, facing away from you.
- Cup their chin with one hand, with their head resting against your body.
- Brush teeth and along the gum line. Brush gently in small circles. Clean every tooth thoroughly and brush the inside, outside and chewing surfaces of teeth.
- After brushing, encourage your child to spit out toothpaste, not to swallow it or rinse with water. This leaves a small amount of toothpaste in the mouth to keep protecting teeth. Spitting out can be difficult for small

children. You will need to encourage and show them how to do it.

Teaching your child to brush their teeth

Encourage children to take part in this routine as they get older. Help them develop the skill by letting them have a go first before you follow up to make sure all surfaces have been cleaned.

At around the age of eight years, children have developed the fine motor skills needed for tooth brushing. However, supervision is often needed past this age until you are sure they can do it well by themselves.

Tips for brushing children's teeth

Not all children will enjoy toothbrushing at first. Some tips to encourage toothbrushing are:

- Make it fun! Sing a song, make brushing noises; anything that will make the time enjoyable. Sometimes it just takes patience and persistence for young children to accept toothbrushing.
- Children like to copy others, so ask other family members to show children how they brush.
- Make sure that your child learns to brush every tooth. They should clean the front, back, and chewing surface of all teeth.
- Take at least two minutes to brush your child's teeth. Playing a children's tooth brushing video or app can help make this easier.
- There are many dentist story books that can be used to help teach young children about brushing teeth.
- Some children will do well using two toothbrushes. One for them to hold and use and one for you to brush properly. Other children respond to 'your turn, my turn', where the child brushes first then the parent brushes.
- If your child doesn't like the taste of toothpaste, try brushing without toothpaste first. Then use a small amount of children's low fluoride toothpaste to get them used to the flavour.
- If you are not having any success in the bathroom, try another location in the house.
- For older children, try using a reward system. For example, mark the number of times their teeth are cleaned twice a day on a calendar and offer a reward when they reach a goal.
- A children's electric tooth brush is a good alternative for children aged older than three years and can make brushing easier.
- If using an electric toothbrush, read the instructions for your brush. Place a pea-sized amount of toothpaste on the brush head and guide the brush to your child's teeth first, then switch it on. Move the head slowly from tooth, including brushing where the gum and tooth meet. Do not press too hard or scrub them, let the brush do the work. Be sure to brush the inside, outside and chewing surfaces of all their teeth, top and bottom.

Dental checks for children

Children should have an oral health check by the time they turn two. This may be done by a dentist, other dental professional or health professional, such as a maternal and child health nurse or doctor.

Older children should continue to have check-ups with a dentist or other oral health professional. Ask them how often your child needs to have a dental check-up.

Where to get help

- Your **dentist**
- **Dental Health Services Victoria** provides public dental services through the **Royal Dental Hospital Melbourne** and community dental clinics, for eligible people. For more information about public dental services Tel. **(03) 9341 1000**, or **1800 833 039** outside Melbourne metro
- **Australian Dental Association 'Find a Dentist'** search function or Tel. **(03) 8825 4600**
- Your maternal and child health nurse

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