Tooth decay - young children
Summary

- Children’s baby teeth are at risk of decay.
- Tooth cleaning should begin as soon as the first tooth appears.
- Regular dental check-ups are important for spotting and treating early signs of decay.
- Babies under four to six months need only breastfeeding or formula.

Causes of tooth decay in young children

Bacteria in the mouth feed on sugars from foods and drinks. These bacteria produce acid, which damages the outer surface of the tooth (the enamel). Saliva helps to repair this damage, but if over time there is more damage than repair, it leaves a cavity or ‘hole’ in the tooth.

Process of early childhood tooth decay

The tooth decay process is also called ‘caries’. In the early stages the teeth can develop white chalky areas. In the later stages, teeth have brown or black areas. The upper four front baby teeth are most commonly affected.

Other names used to refer to this condition include ‘nursing bottle caries’, ‘infant feeding caries’ and ‘baby bottle decay’. These names are used because the evidence suggests that early childhood caries can occur if babies and infants are settled to sleep with a bottle of milk or formula (or other sweet drinks).

Milk can pool in the mouth and the lactose sugar in milk feeds the bacteria that cause decay as the baby sleeps. Saliva flow is low during sleep, and so does not protect against the damage.

Early childhood caries might also occur if toddlers drink sweet drinks, such as fruit juices, cordials or soft drinks. Avoid sugary foods and drinks, especially between meals.

Signs of early childhood tooth decay

Early childhood caries develops over time and can be difficult to see in the early stages.

Tooth decay may show as:
• a dull white band on the tooth surface closest to the gum line – this is the first sign and usually remains undetected by parents
• a yellow, brown or black band on the tooth surface closest to the gum line that indicates the progression to decay
• teeth that look like brownish-black stumps – this indicates that the child has advanced decay.

**Importance of early detection of tooth decay in young children**

In the very early stages, early childhood caries can be reversed with treatment by a dentist or other oral health professional. Unfortunately, because the early stages can be difficult to see, in most cases early childhood decay is not picked up until the later, more serious stages. At this time, it cannot be reversed and the child may need major dental treatment.

Check your child’s teeth regularly. If you see anything unusual make a dental appointment.

**Preventing tooth decay in young children**

There are many ways in which you can help to prevent tooth decay in young children, including:

- good feeding habits
- providing water as the main drink from 12 months
- avoiding juices and other sugary drinks
- regular cleaning or brushing
- regular dental checks with an oral health professional from the age of two.

**Good feeding habits help to prevent tooth decay**

To prevent tooth decay:

- When your baby has finished feeding, remove them from the breast or bottle.
- Don’t put your baby to bed with a bottle.
- Never put sweet drinks in a baby bottle.

Start teaching your child to drink from a feeding cup from about six months of age. By around 12 months, they should be drinking only from a cup.

For children over 12 months, water is the main drink. Plain full-fat milk is also a healthy drink choice. Children can drink low-fat milk from two years of age. Fruit juice is not necessary or recommended for children because of its high sugar content and acidity.

Children can start to eat solid foods from around six months of age. Offer a wide range of nutritious foods with a variety of textures and flavours.

Also:

- Never dip dummies in sweet substances, such as honey, jam or sugar.
- Ask for sugar-free medicines if possible.
- Look in your child’s mouth regularly to spot early signs of decay.

**Cleaning teeth helps to prevent tooth decay**

Cleaning or brushing your child’s teeth helps remove the bacteria that cause decay.

- Start to clean your baby’s teeth as soon as the first tooth comes through. Use a wet cloth or a small children’s toothbrush with water.
- From 18 months to six years of age, use a small pea-sized amount of children’s low-fluoride toothpaste on a small, soft toothbrush.
- At six years of age children can use a pea-sized amount of standard fluoride toothpaste.
- If you live in an area that doesn’t have fluoride in the drinking water, ask your dentist about the right toothpaste for your child.
- Brush teeth and along the gum line twice a day; in the morning and at night before bed.
- Children will need an adult to help them brush their teeth until they can do it well by themselves (usually about eight years of age).

**Dental checks can spot the early signs of tooth decay**

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

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

**Chalky teeth and risk for tooth decay**

About one in six children have ‘chalky teeth’. This can look like creamy-brown or very white spots (like the colour of chalk), particularly on the molars (back teeth).

Teeth can become ‘chalky’ if the enamel (tooth surface) doesn’t harden properly when the tooth is forming in the developing foetus. Because these teeth are weaker, they have a much higher risk of tooth decay.

Both the baby molars (which come through at around age two), and the permanent adult molars (which come through at around six years of age), can be affected. If you think your child might have chalky teeth, see a dentist or other oral health professional.

**Where to get help**

- Your **dentist**
- **Dental Health Services Victoria** provide 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
Better Health Channel – Seeing a dentist or dental health practitioner

References
- Infant Feeding Guidelines: information for health workers 2012, National Health and Medical Research Council, Canberra.

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More information

Mouth and teeth

The following content is displayed as Tabs. Once you have activated a link navigate to the end of the list to view its associated content. The activated link is defined as Active Tab

- Mouth and teeth basics
- Mouth conditions
- Dental care for children
- Dental care
- Dental procedures

Mouth and teeth basics

- Calcium
  If you don’t have enough calcium in your diet, your bones will eventually become weak and brittle.
- Mouth
  The mouth helps us to digest our food and communicate through speech.
- Teeth
  Teeth have different shapes that reflect the different jobs they do in helping us eat and digest food.
- Tongue
  There are about 9000 taste buds on the average adult tongue.

Mouth conditions

- Cleft palate and cleft lip
  Most cleft palates and cleft lips can be repaired so that appearance and speech develop normally.
- Cold sores
  Cold sores are blisters around the mouth and nose, caused by the herpes simplex virus.
- Dental injuries - knocked out teeth
  A knocked out permanent tooth can survive if it is immediately put back. Do not put a knocked-out baby tooth back.
- Dry mouth syndrome
  A dry mouth is a symptom of an underlying problem, rather than a disease in itself.
- Gum disease
  Brushing teeth regularly helps to prevent gum disease and early treatment can help save affected teeth.
- Halitosis or bad breath
  Having halitosis or bad breath can have a major impact on a person.
- Mouth cancer
  Smoking increases the risk of mouth cancer six-fold.
- Mouth ulcers
  In most cases, mouth ulcers are harmless and resolve by themselves in a few days.
- Teeth - gapped teeth
  In many cases, a gap between the upper front teeth will close by itself.
- Teeth grinding
  Teeth grinding (bruxism) is involuntary clenching or grinding of the teeth usually during sleep.
Dental care for children

- Dental care - fluoride
  Fluoride in your drinking water is like a constant 'repair kit' for your teeth...

- Dental checks for young children
  Children should have an oral health check by the time they turn two...

- Dental injuries - knocked out teeth
  A knocked out permanent tooth can survive if it is immediately put back. Do not put a knocked-out baby tooth back...

- Dummy
  Dummy sucking should stop before school age to avoid teeth or mouth problems...

- Oral conditions - young children
  Oral thrush, mouth ulcers and cold sores are common oral conditions in babies and young children...

- Recent arrivals, asylum seekers and family support services
  Provides an overview of family support programs and health services available to refugees and asylum seekers living in Victoria...

- Seeing a dentist or dental health practitioner
  There are a range of dental services available to assist you with any dental health problems you or your family may have...

- Teeth development in children
  Teething symptoms are common in children and can be managed without medications...

- Thumb and finger sucking
  Finger or thumb sucking should stop before school age to avoid mouth problems...

- Toothbrushing - children
  Start cleaning your baby’s teeth as soon as the first tooth comes through to help prevent tooth decay...

Dental care

- Teeth care
  Tooth decay can be prevented with a good diet, regular tooth brushing and dental check-ups...

- 10 tips on how to eat more calcium
  Reduce your intake of coffee, alcohol and soft drinks...

- 10 tips to look after your teeth
  See your dentist for regular check-ups...

- Dental erosion
  Visit your dentist regularly so tooth erosion is detected early, helping prevent further tooth surface loss...

- Dental injuries - knocked out teeth
  A knocked out permanent tooth can survive if it is immediately put back. Do not put a knocked-out baby tooth back...

- Dentures
  It is important to look after your dentures and your gums to keep your mouth healthy...

- Gum disease
  Brushing teeth regularly helps to prevent gum disease and early treatment can help save affected teeth...

- Mouthguards
  A mouthguard provides the best protection for the teeth, lips and jaw during sport and leisure activities...

- Pregnancy and teeth
  It's important to look after your teeth and gums when you're pregnant, as gum disease can affect your baby...

- Recent arrivals, asylum seekers and family support services
  Provides an overview of family support programs and health services available to refugees and asylum seekers living in Victoria...

Dental procedures
• Cosmetic dentistry
  Discoloured, chipped or missing teeth can affect self-confidence but cosmetic dentistry techniques can help.
• Dental fillings
  Dental fillings are used to repair worn, decayed or damaged teeth.
• Dental injuries - knocked out teeth
  A knocked out permanent tooth can survive if it is immediately put back. Do not put a knocked-out baby tooth back.
• Dental sealants
  A dental sealant is a coating applied to the permanent back teeth to prevent tooth decay.
• Dental treatment
  Modern techniques mean that dental and oral health treatment is almost always painless.
• Orthodontic treatment
  Orthodontics involves the use of a range of corrective devices, such as braces and plates, to encourage the teeth to align properly.
• Root canal treatment
  Root canal treatment is a dental procedure to replace a tooth's damaged or dead pulp with synthetic filling.
• Wisdom teeth
  Wisdom teeth that may cause problems are best taken out sooner rather than later.

Related Information

• No Jab No Play
  No Jab No Play – from 1 January 2016, all parents/guardians seeking to enrol their child at an early childhood service in Victoria must provide evidence that the child is fully immunised for their age.
• A Healthy Start to School
  A Healthy Start to School – a guide for parents of children in their foundation year of school.
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• Toothbrushing - children
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