


**Please note:** This information was as current as we could make it on the date given above. But medical information is always changing, and some information given here may be out of date. For regularly updated information on a variety of health topics, please visit [familydoctor.org](http://familydoctor.org), the AAFP patient education Web site.

 [An article on this topic is available in this issue of \*AFP\*.](#)

## Taking Care of Your Child's Teeth

Taking good care of your child's teeth is important because even "baby" teeth help your child chew food and speak clearly. Baby teeth also hold space so permanent teeth can grow in straight. If you start your child off with good dental habits, your child will find it easier to keep those good habits forever.

### How should I care for my child's teeth?

You should start caring for your child's gums and teeth at birth. Gently wipe your baby's gums with a soft, wet cloth after each feeding. When baby teeth appear, start cleaning them with a soft, child-sized toothbrush twice a day. In children up to 4 years of age, use a small, pea-sized dab of children's fluoride toothpaste. It is important to use a small amount of toothpaste so your baby does not swallow too much of it. Swallowing too much fluoride toothpaste can cause spots on your child's teeth.

### What is fluoride?

Fluoride helps make teeth strong and prevents tooth decay. If the water where you live does not have enough fluoride, your doctor may prescribe fluoride supplements (fluoride drops or pills). You would give these drops or pills every day, starting when your child is about 6 months old. Only give as much as the directions say to use, because too much fluoride can cause spots on your child's teeth. Children should take these drops or pills until they are 12 to 16 years old (or until you move to an area with fluoride in the water).

### When should I start taking my child to the dentist?

Take your child for a first dental visit within six months of the first baby tooth and by no later than the first birthday. This gives the dentist a chance to look for early tooth problems and to talk to you about how to care for your baby's teeth. It also helps your child feel okay in the dentist's office.

### Does anything help teething?

When teeth come through the gums, it can make your baby cross. The gum may be swollen where the tooth is coming in. You can ease the pain by rubbing the gums gently with your finger, letting your child chew on a teething ring or using a pacifier.

## **How does diet affect my child's teeth?**

Healthy eating habits lead to healthy teeth. Give your child a variety of foods. Sweets (candy or cookies), starchy foods (crackers) and sticky foods (raisins) stay in the mouth longer, so they can easily cause tooth decay. If your child wants a snack between meals, offer fruits or vegetables. They're better for growing teeth.

## **Is thumb-sucking bad for my child's teeth?**

It is normal for children to suck their thumbs, their fingers or pacifiers. Most children give up this habit on their own by the time they are 4 years old and do no harm to their teeth. If your child still has a sucking habit after age 4, tell your dentist. Your dentist can watch for problems as the teeth grow. In most children, there is no reason to worry about a sucking habit until the child is 5 or 6 years old, when the permanent teeth start to come in.

## **What is "baby-bottle" tooth decay?**

Babies who go to bed with a bottle of milk, formula or juice are more likely to get tooth decay. Because the sugar in formula, milk or juice stays in contact with the teeth for a long time during the night, the teeth can decay quickly.

Here are some tips to avoid baby-bottle tooth decay:

- Put your child to bed with a bottle of plain water, not milk or juice.
- Stop nursing when your child is asleep or has stopped sucking on the bottle.
- Try not to let your child walk around using a bottle of milk or juice as a pacifier.
- Start to teach your child to drink from a cup at about 6 months of age.
- Plan to stop using a bottle by 12 to 14 months at the latest.
- Don't dip your child's pacifier in honey or sugar.

This handout provides a general overview on this topic and may not apply to everyone. To find out if this handout applies to you and to get more information on this subject, talk to your family doctor.

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