



**NATIONWIDE CHILDREN'S**  
*When your child needs a hospital, everything matters.™*

**Helping Hand™**

*Health Education for Patients and Families*

## Dental: Teeth and Gum Care for Infants and Toddlers

All of us know dental care is important for everyone, but what about baby teeth? Baby teeth are already inside your child's jaws at birth. Dentists say that teeth and gum care should begin even before the first baby tooth comes in.

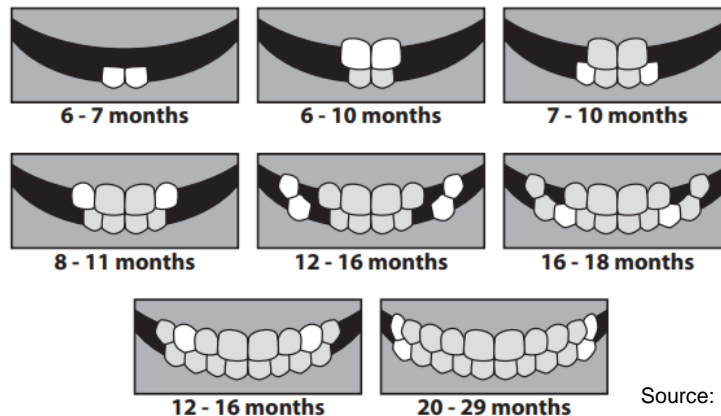
### Why healthy baby teeth are important

Baby teeth help:

- hold spaces open for the adult (permanent) teeth to come in
- form the shape of your child's face
- make it easier for your child to talk more clearly
- make chewing and eating easier

### How many teeth and when

- Usually by 6 months, the first tooth will appear in the mouth (Picture 1).



**Picture 1**

Source: <https://scdhec.gov/>

- The front teeth fall out at 6 to 7 years of age. The back teeth (those used for chewing) do not fall out until the child is 10 to 12 years old.

## Tooth decay

Tooth decay (cavities) can happen when teeth are not cared for. Cavities are caused by plaque (plak). Plaque is a harmful layer of bacteria that forms on the teeth. When your child eats food or takes medicine that has sugar in it, the bacteria produce acids. These acids harm the teeth and make cavities form. Cavities happen faster in baby teeth than in adult teeth.

Cavities can cause:

- harm to permanent teeth that have not come in yet
- pain
- infections that can affect the whole body
- costly dental or emergency care
- missed daycare or school days

## How to clean your child's mouth

Before and after the teeth come in, clean your child's mouth after each feeding or at least twice a day (Picture 2).

1. Before and after the teeth come in, clean your child's mouth after each feeding or at least twice a day. Place your child in a position that is comfortable for both of you. You should be able to see easily inside their mouth.
2. Before teeth come in, use a clean gauze pad or soft cloth over your finger. Dip the gauze in water so it is damp, but not soaking wet. Wipe your child's teeth and gums gently.
3. When your child's teeth start coming in, begin to use a small, soft toothbrush. Place the head (bristles) of the toothbrush at an angle along a row of teeth and against the gum line. Brush gently in circular motions. Brushing back and forth can hurt the gums and teeth. Do all sides of the teeth.
4. Finish by brushing the tongue with the toothbrush.
5. All children should use **fluoride** toothpaste as soon as the first tooth comes in. For children younger than 3, use about the size of a grain of rice. For children age 3 and older, use a pea-size amount (Picture 3). They should try to spit out the toothpaste, but it is safe to swallow these small amounts if your child does not spit yet.
6. Children can start to learn to brush their own teeth at age 2. By age 10, they should be able to do it alone. You can start to teach them by having them watch you brush your teeth first.



**Picture 2** Clean your baby's mouth after each feeding at least twice a day.



Source: [Fluoride \(hhs.gov\)](https://www.hhs.gov)

**Picture 3** Before age 3, use toothpaste about the size of a grain of rice. After age 3, use an amount the size of a pea.

## **Other things to do to prevent tooth decay**

**Be careful that your child is not eating or drinking frequently throughout the day.**

Each time your child drinks or eats something, within 20 minutes, the sugar in it is changed into an acid.

- Use a bottle at feeding time only. Do not use a bottle or breastfeeding as a pacifier.
- Do not put your baby to bed with a bottle of formula or breastmilk.
- If your baby falls asleep while breastfeeding, remove breast from their mouth.
- Once the first tooth appears, avoid night feedings and frequent, on demand feedings.
- Wean your baby from a bottle to a cup by 12 months of age.
- After your child turns one, if thirsty, they can sip water at any time during the day. Do not give them other things to drink, except at meals.

## **Fluoride**

Fluoride makes teeth stronger and helps protect them from tooth decay. After your child's first tooth appears, the dentist or dental hygienist may put a coat of fluoride on their teeth.

## **Diet**

- Do not give a child under age one sugary drinks, juice or water. Give only breastmilk or formula. Do not add sugars, like honey, to drinks.
- After 12 months, offer water between meals. Do not give other things to drink except at meals. Rinse the mouth with water after eating anything sugary. Children can occasionally have 4 ounces of 100% juice at a meal. Be sure that you are not giving juice drinks.
- Avoid giving gummy snacks and foods that can stick and stay on teeth for a long time.
- As your child gets older, offer more raw, crunchy fruits and vegetables, cheese and yogurt for snacks. Limit starchy soft foods that can stick to teeth.

## **Teething**

- To help make your child feel better, sometimes it helps to gently rub their gums with a clean finger or give them a clean, cold object to chew on, like a teething ring.
- Your child may drool more, be fussy and have a low fever for one to two days.

## **Thumb-sucking and using a pacifier**

Usually there is no damage to the teeth from thumb-sucking or using a pacifier. After age 3, the habit could affect the permanent teeth as they come in.

If you have any questions, ask your child's dentist, dental hygienist, or health care provider, or call the Dental Clinic at (614) 722-5650.