

PREVENTING DENTAL CAVITIES: Getting an Early Start

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Before Your Child is Born

Even before your child is born, there are things you can do to help assure the baby's teeth develop properly and healthy. A balanced diet is very important for the pregnant mom because the baby's teeth begin to form between the third and sixth month of pregnancy. A diet that has proper amounts of vitamins A C and D, protein, calcium and phosphorous helps develop healthy teeth. Inadequate nutrition on the mom's part can result in poorly formed tooth enamel that can make the developing teeth have weaker, softer teeth which are more prone to developing cavities once they erupt.

Morning sickness is a consequence of pregnancy that can have implications on a mother's teeth. There is a natural tendency to want to brush the teeth after a vomiting episode, but this can have harmful effects to the enamel. The stomach acid can soften the outermost layer of the teeth, and brushing the teeth right after can actually scratch the enamel. A more healthy solution would be to rinse the mouth with water and follow it with a fluoride mouth rinse. Wait at least thirty minutes before brushing the teeth again. If you need to get the bad taste out of your mouth you can put a dab of fluoridated toothpaste on your finger and paint it along the teeth.

A pregnant woman should be making sure her teeth and gums are in a healthy condition in order to avoid problems with her own teeth and gums. During pregnancy hormone levels increase. This can cause gums to become red, puffy, or become tender. This response can cause the gums to bleed easily when brushed. Mothers should see a dentist regularly throughout their pregnancy to help avoid problems, by having plaque removed and detecting any cavities which may be occurring.

After Your Child is Born

A baby may not start to get teeth until they are age 6 months or later, but there are still some things you can do before teeth erupt to make sure they come into a healthy environment. The bacteria in a caregiver's mouth can be passed on to their child. If a mom or dad has cavities that are present or gum disease, the "bad" bacteria that causes these things can get transferred to the child through contact with the parent's saliva. Sharing utensils or cups, or blowing on food can cause the cavity causing bacteria to be passed on. If a mom or dad's mouth is healthy, there is a much better chance that "good" bacteria, rather than "bad" bacteria will develop in the baby's mouth. You can ask the dentist how to decrease the "bad" bacteria in your mouth.

A child may not like getting their teeth brushed if they have never been used to having a toothbrush in their mouth before. You can start wiping the gums of the infant even before any teeth are visible. The child will get used to this cleansing action after feedings, and they will be less likely to get upset when a toothbrush is introduced once they start getting teeth. A washcloth or burp rag is all that is needed to wipe the teeth in the beginning. Once teeth begin to come in you can get a soft bristled toothbrush that has a small head to fit in the baby's mouth. Make sure the handle is long enough for you to hold onto it, however, since you will need to be the one brushing the child's teeth.

The Child's First Dental Visit

The American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry recommends that a child's first dental visit should be by one year of age or six months after the first tooth erupts. If you have been going to the dentist while you were pregnant, you can ask your dentist how early they start seeing kids. Not every general dentist feels comfortable seeing infants and toddlers, but this shouldn't stop you from having your child seen. Ask your dentist if they can recommend a pediatric dentist who will be able to examine your child once they reach their first birthday. The first dental visit will provide the opportunity for the dentist to discuss with you

ways to prevent dental cavities in your child by providing proper eating and brushing habits. The dentist can also recommend ways to stop pacifier and thumb habits when your child is older. If you already have a dental home established, you will know where to turn to should your child injure his/her mouth in a fall or accident. Once the child is age three, they will already be accustomed to the dental visit and be better prepared for the dental cleaning visit.

The Center for Disease Control lists the ages of 2-5 as the only age in which children's dental disease is still on the rise. By Focusing on your child's dental health, even before the teeth have erupted, will increase the chance that your child will grow up cavity free.

Dr. Craig S. Hollander is a pediatric dentist in St. Louis, Missouri. He was honored as the 2005 Missouri Dentist of the Year for his work with children's dental health initiatives, and has been active on many projects including Give Kids a Smile, and the Missouri Dental Association's "Start Right" project.