

What causes tooth decay?

A thin, sticky colorless film of bacteria called plaque covers teeth. The bacteria produce acids that can attack tooth enamel. When sugary food or liquid remains in the mouth after eating, the bacteria have more time to produce decay-causing acid.

What is Baby Bottle Tooth Decay?

Baby bottle tooth decay is a condition that can destroy the primary teeth of an infant or young child. It occurs when the child's teeth are frequently exposed to sugary liquids for long periods. These liquids include milk (even breast milk), formula, fruit juice and other sweetened liquids.



Healthy primary (baby) teeth



Mild decay



Moderate decay



Severe decay

They're just baby teeth, aren't they?

Humans, like most mammals, have two sets of teeth: primary (baby) and permanent (adult). Some people think that primary teeth are not important because they will eventually fall out to make room for adult teeth. On the contrary, primary teeth "hold" space in the jaw for the permanent teeth. They help the child chew, which is essential for a healthy diet. They help the child learn to pronounce words and give structure to the face.

By the time a child is born, 20 primary teeth usually have formed inside the gums. The front four teeth typically begin to appear when the baby is between age six months and one year. Most children have a set of 20 primary teeth by the time they are three years old.

Unfortunately, tooth decay can begin as soon as the teeth emerge. It is the baby's upper front teeth that are usually affected, but decay can damage other teeth, too.

Decay in the primary teeth can cause pain and can harm the erupting permanent teeth that are still growing inside the gums. Even though they're not visible until the child is about six years old, the permanent teeth begin to develop tooth enamel as early as three to four months after birth. Disease can spread to the hidden permanent teeth. And the decay can be associated with general health problems in some children.

If primary teeth are lost prematurely, the emerging adult teeth may shift, resulting in an irregular bite that could require additional treatment. If primary teeth are kept healthy until they're ready to fall out on their own, there is a better chance of the adult teeth erupting in normal alignment.

What can I do to keep baby's teeth healthy?

Babies rely on parents or caregivers for good health. Take an active role in caring for the baby's teeth by cleaning them at home, providing a balanced diet and scheduling regular dental visits.

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Never allow a baby or toddler to fall asleep with a bottle that contains milk, formula, fruit juices, sweetened liquids or a pacifier dipped in sugar or honey. Even diluted sweet drinks can be damaging. Infants should finish their bedtime or naptime bottle (or breastfeeding) before going to bed.

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Start oral care early. Wipe the baby's gums with a clean gauze pad after each feeding. Begin brushing your child's teeth with water as soon as the first tooth appears. If you are considering using fluoride toothpaste before the child's second birthday, ask your dentist or physician first. When choosing oral care products, look for those that display the American Dental Association's Seal of Acceptance.

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To reduce the chances of tooth decay, **children should be encouraged to drink from a cup by their first birthday.**

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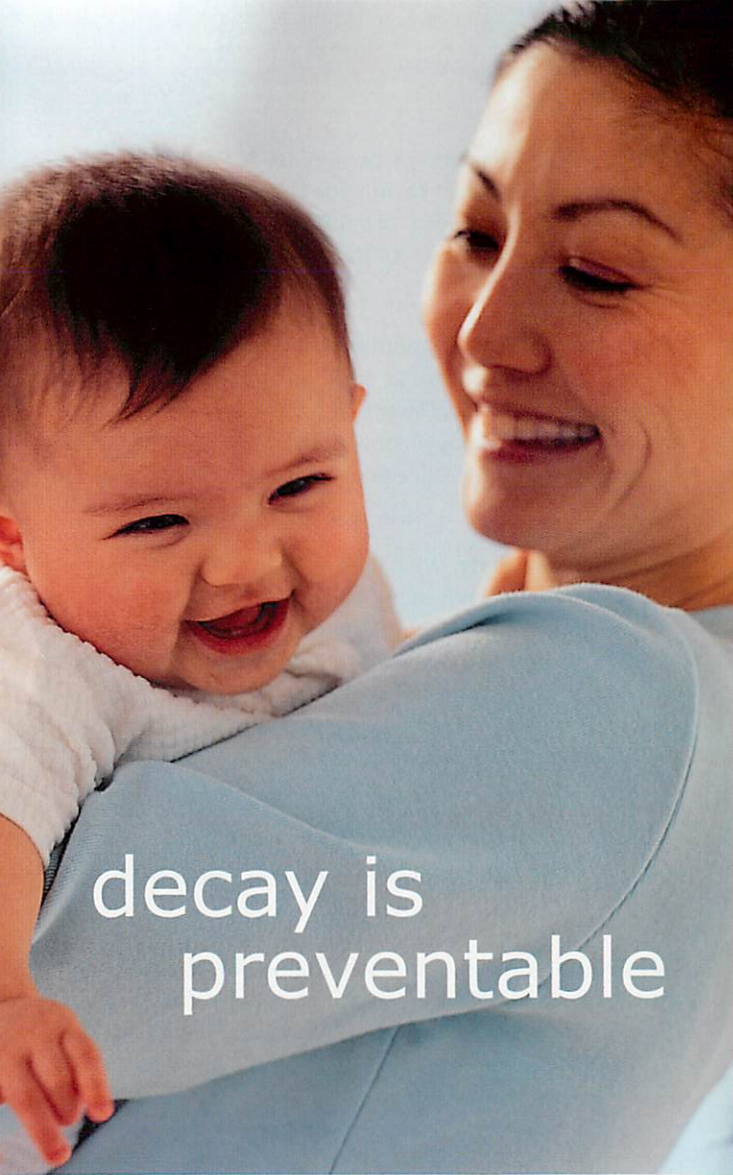
Talk to your dentist about scheduling the child's first visit. It's beneficial for the first visit to occur within six months of the eruption of the first tooth and no later than the baby's first birthday. Consider your child's first visit as a "healthy baby checkup" for his or her teeth.

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During the visit, your dentist can show you how to properly clean the child's teeth. Besides checking for tooth decay and other conditions like thumb sucking, your dentist can explain fluoride and the right amount that a child needs for healthy teeth. The dentist may also recommend oral care products for your family.

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In many cases, parents rely on others to care for the baby at least part of the time. **Be sure to share information about preventing baby bottle tooth decay with caregivers.** Keeping baby's smile healthy is a team effort.



decay is
preventable

As soon as a baby's first teeth appear—usually by age six months or so—the child is susceptible to decay. This condition is often referred to as Baby Bottle Tooth Decay or Early Childhood Caries (cavities). In some unfortunate cases, infants and toddlers have experienced severe tooth decay that has resulted in dental restorations or extractions. The good news is that decay is preventable.

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What you should
know about...

baby bottle tooth decay



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