



# Oral Health Messages

## KIDS 0 TO 5 YEARS OLD

A basic guide to help you care for your child's oral health:

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### More resources

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**E**ven though they are temporary, baby teeth are very important to your child's health and development. They help him or her chew, speak and smile. They also hold space in the jaws for permanent teeth that are already growing under the gums. When a baby tooth is lost too early, the permanent teeth can drift into the empty space, which makes it difficult later for your adult teeth to find the room they need. This can lead to teeth that are crooked or crowded. Starting infants off with good oral care can help protect their teeth for decades to come.

### Good Nutrition and Oral Health

Children need strong, healthy teeth to chew their food, speak and have a good-looking smile. What's more, a good diet is essential for a child's growth and development. Almost all foods, including milk or vegetables, have some type of sugar, which can contribute to tooth decay. To help control the amount of sugar your child consumes, always try to read food labels and choose foods and beverages that are low in added sugars. Also, select beverages, such as water, that hydrate and contribute to good nutrition.

What to Eat: According to **My Plate**, a website from the Center for Nutrition Policy and Promotion, an agency of U.S. Department of Agriculture, a balanced diet should include:

- **Fruits and vegetables.** Combined these should be half of what your child eats every day.
- **Grains.** Make sure at least half of their grains are whole grains, such as oatmeal, whole wheat bread and brown rice.
- **Dairy.** Choose low-fat or fat-free dairy foods.
- **Lean proteins.** Make lean protein choices, such as lean beef, skinless poultry and fish. Try to vary protein choices to include eggs, beans, peas and legumes, too.

The amount of food that young children eat varies from day to day and meal to meal. You can find a list of recommended portions sizes for children aged 1-4 years old on our website at [visionycompromiso.org/oralhealth](http://visionycompromiso.org/oralhealth).

In addition to a nutritious diet, snacking habits, bottles and pacifiers also impact your child's oral health. Here are some tips to keep your

child's mouth healthy:

- Breastfeeding is the best! Breastfeed your baby your baby for 6 months or longer if you can.
- If you are going to give bottle to your baby, place only formula, milk or breast milk in bottles. Avoid filling baby bottles with liquids such as sugar water, juice or soft drinks.
- Infants should finish their bedtime and naptime bottles before going to bed. Babies who bottle-feed themselves to sleep are at increased risk for tooth decay.
- If your child uses a pacifier, provide one that is clean—don't dip it in sugar or honey.
- Try not to share saliva with your baby and avoid putting a pacifier (or a spoon) in your mouth before giving it to your child. Cavity-causing bacteria are easily passed from the parent (or other caregiver) to the baby.
- Encourage children to drink from a cup by their first birthday and discourage frequent or prolonged use of sippy cups.
- Encourage healthy eating habits, serve nutritious snacks and limit sweets.
- Discuss your child's fluoride needs with your dentist or pediatrician. They may recommend a fluoride supplement if you live in an area where the tap water is not fluoridated.

## Oral Hygiene

Problems that might affect the oral health of children include thumb sucking, tongue thrusting, lip sucking, and early childhood tooth decay that can cause baby teeth to fall out too soon.

**Teething:** Although newborns have no visible teeth, a baby's front four teeth will usually "erupt" or push through the gums at about six months of age. This varies considerably, however, and some children may not have their first tooth until 12 or 14 months. Usually by age three, all 20 baby teeth will push through the gums and most children will have a full set of these teeth.

As their teeth erupt, some babies may become fussy, sleepless, and irritable, lose their appetite or drool more than usual. However, diarrhea, rashes and a fever are not normal symptoms for a teething baby. If your infant has a fever or diarrhea or continues to be cranky and uncomfortable during teething, call your physician.

## HOW TO CLEAN AND BRUSH YOUR BABY'S TEETH

Good oral health care begins even before your baby's first tooth appears. Here are some steps that you can follow:

**Cleaning baby teeth:** Clean your baby's mouth regularly beginning during the first few days after birth by gently wiping the gums with a clean, moist gauze pad or washcloth.

**Brushing baby teeth:** As soon as your child's first teeth appear, begin a teeth-cleaning routine using a soft baby toothbrush to clean plaque and avoid tooth decay.

**Toothpaste:** Toothpaste: Use a tiny smear of fluoride toothpaste about the size of a grain of rice and try to minimize the amount of toothpaste your child swallows. This will help spread the fluoride onto their teeth without your child swallowing too much of it.

Once your child really learns to spit (about age 3), use a pea-sized amount of toothpaste and teach your child to spit into the sink after brushing.

**Dental check-ups:** Talk to your dentist about scheduling your child's first dental visit. Pediatric dentists receive specialized training and are primary and specialty oral care providers for infants and children through the teenage years, including those with special health needs.

## HOW TO BRUSH

Parents need to be involved to help their children learn to properly brush their teeth. Helping your kids get into the habit of brushing their teeth twice a day is the key to a lifetime of healthy smiles. Don't just set a timer and supervise! There are lots of things that you can do to motivate them: put on music they like, choose character toothbrushes they like, use easy to remember songs that teach kids of all ages good dental care, tell them a story, be creative, make it fun! Set an example and stick to the toothbrushing routine, even when you are on vacation or "off schedule," and provide lots of positive reinforcement with a hug and say "I'm proud of you!"

## Oral Health Begins at Home

Even though baby teeth are eventually replaced with permanent teeth, keeping baby teeth healthy is important to a child's overall health and well-being. The good news is that tooth decay is preventable!

### BREASTFEEDING

Research shows that babies who are exclusively breastfed for the first 6 months are less likely to have teeth alignment issues such as open bites, cross bites and overbites than those who are exclusively breastfed for shorter lengths of time, or not at all.

Another benefit of breastfeeding is reduced risk of baby bottle tooth decay. Frequent, prolonged exposure of the baby's teeth to drinks that contain sugar—including formula, milk and fruit juice—causes tooth decay and often occurs when a baby is put to bed with a bottle. It most often occurs in the upper front teeth, but may also affect other teeth. Water does not have the same impact because the teeth are not bathed in sugary liquids.

### HEALTHY SNACKS

To protect teeth, sweet foods and drinks should be limited to mealtimes and no more than one snack per day. Below you can find some recommendations.

- Fresh fruit but not dried fruit
- Vegetable sticks, e.g. carrot, cucumber, pepper, baby corn with dips based on yogurt, cream cheese or pulses in such dishes as hummus
- Wholegrain breakfast cereals with milk
- Cheese cubes and crackers/breadsticks
- Sandwiches, bread rolls and pitta breads with fillings
- Plain yogurt with pieces of fresh fruit
- Currant buns and teacakes
- Pancakes, fruit muffins and plain biscuits
- Fruit cake and carrot cake

### DRINKING WATER

Fluoride helps make tooth enamel more resistant to decay and helps repair weakened enamel. Infants and toddlers who do not receive an adequate amount of fluoride may be at an increased risk for tooth decay. Most, but not all, community water systems



in California are fluoridated. And bottled water may or may not contain fluoride. Therefore, children who regularly drink unfluoridated bottled water or unfluoridated tap water are missing the benefits of fluoride. If you are not sure if your tap water has fluoride, contact your local health department or water supplier.

Fluoride treatments prevent cavities by strengthening the hard, outer shell of teeth, and they may even reverse very early cavities that have just started to form. A fluoride treatment is quick and painless. Your dentist will paint a thin layer of fluoride varnish on your child's teeth. Fluoride varnish is a sticky yellow or orange substance that often has a pleasant taste. The varnish application is fast and sets quickly. Your child may be advised to avoid food or drink for 30 minutes after the treatment.

### SUGARY DRINKS

Juice is high in sugar and calories, water and milk are always the best options for your little one. If your child is under 1 years old, the American Academy of Pediatrics suggests completely removing juice and sodas from his or her diet. Children ages 0-5 should have no more than 4-6 oz. of juice each day.

### STICKY FOODS

Avoid snack foods that are sticky or hard to remove from your child's teeth such as fruit roll ups, crackers, chips, and candy. Even raisins or other dried fruits, often promoted as an all-natural snack, have lots of sugar and are hard to clean.



## Going to the Dentist

Your child's first dental visit should take place soon after that first tooth appears, but no later than the first birthday. Why so early? As soon as your baby has teeth, he or she can get cavities. Being proactive about your child's dental health today can help keep his or her smile healthy for life. During the visit, you will be seated in the dental chair with your child on your lap if your child is not able to—or does not want to—sit in the chair alone. The dentist will examine your child to make sure their jaw and teeth are developing properly and check for mouth injuries, cavities or other issues, clean your child's teeth, and provide you with tips for daily care.



### BEFORE THE VISIT

Although the first visit is primarily for the dentist to examine your child's mouth and to check the growth and development of your child's teeth, it is also a way to start your child on the path towards being comfortable with the dentist. To make the visit a positive experience:

- Talk with your child about visiting the dentist and read children's books or watch a video to prepare you both.
- Consider a morning appointment when children tend to be rested and more cooperative.
- Do your best to keep any anxiety you may be feeling to yourself. Children can pick up on your emotions, so emphasize the positive and be encouraging.
- Never use a dental visit as a punishment or a threat.
- Never bribe your child to attend the visit.

If your child cries a little or wiggles during the exam, don't worry - it's normal, and your dental team understands this is a new experience for your child!

### DURING THE VISIT

Dental visits at an early age are a "well-baby check up" for the teeth. Besides checking for cavities and other problems, the dentist can show you how to clean your child's teeth properly and how to manage habits such as thumb sucking.

During this visit, you can expect the dentist to:

- Inspect your child's mouth for oral injuries, cavities or other problems.
- Let you know if your child is beginning to develop tooth decay.
- Clean your child's teeth and provide tips for daily care.
- Discuss teething, pacifier use, or finger/thumb sucking habits.
- Discuss treatment, if needed, and schedule the next check-up.

### THUMB SUCKING AND PACIFIERS

Thumb sucking is a natural reflex for children. Sucking on thumbs, fingers, pacifiers or other objects may make babies feel secure and happy and help them learn about their world. Young children may also suck to soothe themselves and help them fall asleep. Infants and young children may suck on thumbs, other fingers or pacifiers.

Pacifiers dipped in sugar, honey, juice or sweetened drinks, can lead to tooth decay. Tooth decay can also begin when cavity-causing bacteria pass from saliva in a mother or caregiver's mouth to the baby. When

the mother or caregiver puts the baby's feeding spoon in her mouth, or cleans a pacifier in her mouth, the bacteria can be passed to the baby

When do children stop sucking their thumbs? Children usually stop sucking between the ages of two and four years old, or by the time the permanent front teeth are ready to erupt. If you notice changes in your child's primary teeth, or are concerned about your child's thumb sucking consult your dentist.

## Paying for Your Child's Oral Health Care

In California, all children 0–19 years old, regardless of their immigration status, qualify for Medi-Cal if their parents are considered low income. Under Medi-Cal, all children receive Denti-Cal, which covers most of their dental care services.

Kaiser Permanente Community Health Plan offers both health and dental coverage for uninsured children under 19 years, regardless of immigration status, whose parents' income makes them ineligible for Medi-Cal. Unfortunately, this program is not offered in all counties in California.

## What Does Your Dental Plan Cover?

In California, all health coverage for children will also include pediatric dental benefits. You always have the option to purchase additional coverage through a stand-alone plan if you wish.

Once you determine what your child's dental needs are, work with your child's dentist and benefits provider so that you understand what services are covered. Often, the dentist's office will look into this for you. Most plans cover preventive care.

You can also call your child's plan using the customer services 800 number on your identification card, or go to their website for more information.

## Choosing the Best Dental Home for Your Child's Needs

Parents and dentists each have an important role to play in making a child's first dental visit a positive experience. Dental health is a vital part of your child's overall health and it is important that you select a dental home where they feel comfortable.

If possible, select a pediatric dental office for your child 0–5. Pediatric dentists receive additional training and know how to communicate well with young children. In addition, their office has pediatric equipment and an environment designed to make children feel comfortable. Exam rooms may be decorated with bright colors, animals or fun designs while waiting rooms may feature a variety of toys and activity tables to keep them entertained while they are waiting. A fun environment makes the dentist office a treat for children to visit, and they may even beg to return!

A dental home gives you a safe and trusted place to turn to whether it is for a routine cleaning or a dental emergency. Here are some strategies to help you find the best dental fit for you and your child: Is the appointment schedule convenient for you? If you have dental coverage, is the dentist you're your dental plan's network? Do you and your child feel comfortable there? Is the office clean, neat and orderly? Will you need translation or interpreter services to communicate with the dentist or the dental hygienist? Does the dentist explain the procedures and provide instructions that will help you take care of your child's oral health? Was your child's medical and dental history recorded and placed in a permanent file? Do they have a plan in case of dental emergencies?