

Baby, What A Smile!

My little girl has a mouth full of teeth now. We were beginning to wonder if she would ever have any; she was 13 months old when her first one came in, which, as you mothers know, is kind of late. I was thinking I might have to make her some little dentures or something, but lo and behold, a tooth appeared one day, then another, then another, in rapid succession. Now she can tear through a closed Ziploc bag of Cheerios in an instant. If you ask her where her teeth are, she will gladly open and point them out to you. Of course, she also wants you to open so she can see and touch your teeth. Oh, well, like father, like daughter. All this got me thinking about frequent questions I receive about children's teeth.

Baby teeth are softer and the enamel is thinner than with adult teeth. This makes them often more susceptible to decay than your permanent teeth. Tooth decay, also called cavities or caries, is caused by bacteria taking sugar from our diets and converting it into an acid, which softens the teeth. Children often eat more sugar in their diets than adults, making them prime candidates for cavities. I'm not just talking about candy, gum, or cereal, although those things are significant contributors. One of the worst things children, even babies, often receive on a regular basis is sugary drinks. Many parents put soft drinks or Kool-Aid in bottles or sippy cups and let their children nurse on them all day. This constantly bathes the teeth in sugar, which can lead to extreme decay of teeth. Fruit juices, which many parents believe to be healthy, are also a prime source of cavities. There is even a pattern of decay called "baby bottle caries", which just means that all the child's front teeth rot from the back side due to constant use of sugary drinks in a bottle or sippy cup. These children often end up with silver crowns on all their front teeth. Even milk and formula contain enough sugar to cause problems if the child constantly has a bottle or cup. Never, EVER send your child to bed with a bottle unless it contains only water.

Some parents are not as concerned about dental care for very young children, seeing their teeth as being "temporary" and taking them to the dentist only if something hurts. It is very important that the baby teeth remain in the mouth as long as possible for several reasons. They serve to help the child speak properly and are crucial in building self-confidence. Children are often ashamed or embarrassed if they have missing or decayed teeth showing in their smile. The teeth are important for proper nutrition

and digestion as well. A recent study has shown a potential link between children missing teeth and being underweight or malnourished. Losing baby teeth too early also causes the other teeth to shift. These teeth are space holders for the permanent teeth, and losing them will likely cause the permanent teeth not to be able to come in where they should, if at all.

So how do you take care of baby teeth? The American Dental Association recommends that parents should begin cleaning their babies' mouths with a damp washcloth or infant toothbrush at birth! This not only removes plaque bacteria from the gums, it also gets them used to having someone be in their mouths. Begin using water and a child-sized toothbrush for daily cleanings once they have seven to eight teeth. Children this young have a tendency to swallow toothpaste and too much can be bad for them, so using water alone is suggested. By the age of two, you should begin brushing their teeth once or twice a day, preferable after breakfast and before bed. You can use a fluoride-free paste made for infants and toddlers, or just continue using water alone. They may want to brush their own teeth, but you should always follow up and brush them again yourself, as two year olds are not very thorough or effective! When the child is old enough not to swallow the toothpaste, usually around age three, begin using fluoride paste and teach them to spit it out. An electric or battery powered "spin" brush makes brushing much more effective. My little girl already loves to feel the spinning brush in her mouth.

There are other ways of helping protect baby teeth. For infants and toddlers, getting fluoride in their diets is essential to making their teeth stronger and more resistant to plaque acids. . If your water has fluoride in it, which almost all city water does, they should be getting plenty in their food and drink. Parents with well water may need supplemental drops or tablets. By the age of six, some permanent teeth may be coming in and these teeth can be better protected by the application of sealants, which fill in grooves and food traps on the tops of the teeth. Most importantly, regular dental visits are essential to maintain dental health and catch problems when they are small. Pediatric dentists see children as early as 1 year of age, and most general dentists see children about age three. Get them used to it early and they will not be afraid.

Take care of those little smiles! They are priceless!