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What Is Early Childhood Caries?

Early Childhood Caries is tooth decay that occurs in the primary (baby) teeth of young children. Tooth decay can begin as soon as a baby's teeth come in, usually by the age of six months. Decay in baby teeth can cause pain and, if left untreated, it can destroy the teeth of an infant or young child. Tooth decay has also been proven to influence a child's general health.

A large factor in early childhood tooth decay is the frequent, prolonged exposure of the baby's teeth to liquids that contain sugar, like sweetened water, fruit juice, soda and potentially milk, breast milk and formula. Tooth decay can occur when the baby is put to bed with a bottle, or when a bottle is used as a pacifier for a fussy baby. The sugary liquids pool around the teeth while the child sleeps. Bacteria in the mouth use these sugars as food. They then produce acids that attack the teeth. Each time your child drinks these liquids, acids attack for 20 minutes or longer. After multiple attacks, the teeth can decay.

Another factor in early childhood tooth decay is unhealthy eating habits. Healthy eating habits include a diet with plenty of vegetables, fruit, and whole grains. We encourage a balanced diet to help your child's teeth and gums develop properly. A diet high in sugar and starches, including carbohydrates, may place your child at risk for tooth decay. These foods are safer for teeth if they are eaten with a meal and not as a snack. Sticky foods, such as fruit roll-ups, raisins, and gummy bears, tend to stick to the teeth and are not easily washed away by saliva, water, or other drinks. Gummy vitamins containing sugar can also cause severe decay. These sticky foods have more potential to cause cavities.

Infants and toddlers who do not receive an adequate amount of fluoride may also have an increased risk for tooth decay since fluoride combines with the outer covering of the tooth (enamel) and makes the tooth more resistant to acid attack.

Prevention Of Early Childhood Caries

The good news is that tooth decay is almost completely preventable. You can help prevent tooth decay for your child by following the tips below:

- Parents, first take care of your own teeth and gums. The bacteria you promote in your own mouth get transferred to your child, most commonly through feeding spoons or cleaning pacifiers before the baby uses them. Tooth decay is not genetic; however, it is contagious. The better bacteria ecosystem you have, the better the bacteria ecosystem your child will inherit and start their life with.
- Place only formula, milk or breast milk in bottles. Avoid filling the bottle with liquids such as sugar water, juice or soft drinks. Your child should finish their bedtime and nap-time bottles before going to bed. The only liquid allowed in bed should be water.

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- Encourage healthy eating habits that include a diet with plenty of vegetables, fruit and whole grains. Serve nutritious snacks and limit sweets to mealtimes. What a child consumes is very important (we all know about candy causing cavities), but the frequency at which they consume is much more important.
 - ◇ In general, every time we consume sugars or carbohydrates, the bacteria in our mouth also consume. As the bacteria digests, they make acid as a byproduct. This acid erodes the enamel (outside layer of the tooth), resulting in loss of minerals. If this happens long enough and frequently enough, the surface of the tooth starts to crumble and the “cavity”, or hole, forms.
 - ◇ We tell parents to target 2.5-3 hour breaks between eating times, which allows the minerals in our saliva to “remineralize” the enamel and replace the minerals that were lost.
- After each feeding, wipe the baby’s gums with a clean, damp gauze pad or washcloth. The goal is to consistently break up that bacteria ecosystem and begin the healthy habit of daily cleaning. This will remove plaque and bits of food that can harm erupting teeth. When your child’s teeth begin to erupt, brush them gently with a child’s size toothbrush. The earlier you start a habit, the easier it is to follow through.
- Young children usually do not like getting their teeth brushed. It is not a pleasant feeling when you don’t understand the intent behind it. Your role as the parent includes providing for the health and well-being of your child. Brushing teeth requires the same principle, doing something with your child even if they don’t like it.
 - ◇ Do not make the mistake of only brushing their teeth if they want to do it. The habit of brushing teeth, and gums, must be part of their daily routine beginning in infancy.
 - ◇ Try and make it fun for your child by singing songs or making a game out of it.
- It is important to use only a rice grain sized smear of toothpaste with fluoride on children one to four years of age. (See Fluoride Section)
 - ◇ When your child can be counted on to spit and not swallow toothpaste (usually not before age four), begin brushing the teeth with a pea-sized amount of toothpaste.
- Parents should help brush and floss their child’s teeth until they are at least six years old. A child cannot brush well simply because they want to brush their teeth. Desire does not equal performance. Only after years of practice can a child brush sufficiently on their own to maintain optimal oral health.
 - ◇ Taking turns is a great way to start out. But that is only for practice, not for performance.
- Ensure that your child has adequate exposure to fluoride. Discuss your child’s fluoride needs with Dr. Goodwine or your pediatrician. (See Fluoride Section)

Treatment

When your child’s first tooth appears, their first dental visit should be scheduled. Treat the first dental visit as you would a well-baby checkup with the child’s pediatrician. It is beneficial for the first dental visit to occur within six months after the first tooth appears as prevention of decay. Although this may seem early, starting early is the key to a lifetime of good dental health and habits.

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This initial appointment gives us the opportunity to discuss diet/nutrition and proper oral hygiene care and to prevent any dental problems that can occur. Primary teeth are important. It is true that they will fall out, but they do play a role in the proper growth and development of your child until they are naturally lost. Baby teeth act as guides for adult teeth. They have nerves just like adult teeth. If decay progresses rapidly, kids will feel pain or discomfort like adult teeth. The general guideline is that front baby teeth fall out around age six, and primary molars (back teeth) usually fall out around age twelve. Healthy teeth allow children to chew food more easily, learn to speak clearly and smile with confidence. During your first visit, you and your child will get to meet Dr. Goodwine and his experienced team. We encourage your child to explore their new dental environment and we invite you to be an active part of your child's dental health. Children are often afraid of anything new and different, and crying is a normal reaction to that fear.

If additional treatment is recommended for your child, there are several treatment options available. These treatment options largely depend on your child's treatment needs, age, and behavior. An in-depth discussion with Dr. Goodwine and the treatment team can help determine how to best solve any dental problems that may be occurring.

We thank you for the chance to provide dental care for your child. We recognize that this may be a new experience for your child, and we look forward to providing them with the foundation and tools for a lifetime of a healthy smile!

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