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What Is Childhood Caries?

Childhood Caries is tooth decay that occurs in the primary (baby) or permanent teeth of children. Tooth decay can begin as soon as teeth come in. Decay in teeth can cause pain, infection and, if left untreated, it can destroy the teeth of your child. Tooth decay has also been proven to influence a child's general health.

A large factor in childhood tooth decay is the frequent, prolonged exposure of the child's teeth to liquids that contain sugar, like sweetened water, fruit juice, soda and potentially milk. The sugary liquids pool around the teeth. 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 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.

Children 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 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.
- Establish a realistic brushing and flossing routine. 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 teeth.
 - ◇ Dr. Goodwine recommends twice daily brushing. Once in the morning after breakfast and once before you go to bed. Floss every day between any teeth that are tight (back teeth are typically close together around age four).
 - ◇ Use your tongue after you eat anything to make sure your teeth feel slick. Especially after lunch or any snacks (slick teeth = clean and healthy teeth).

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- When your child can be counted on to spit and not swallow toothpaste (usually after 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.
 - ◇ Even after age six, they will require close supervision.
 - ◇ Taking turns is a great way to start out. But that is only for practice, not for performance.
- Encourage healthy eating habits that include a diet with plenty of vegetables, fruit and whole grains. Serve nutritious snacks and limit sweets to mealtimes.
- Limit juice, sodas, and sports drinks. Even sugar-free drinks are a problem because of their acid content)
 - ◇ Try to limit sugary drinks to no more than one cup, and only drink them with a meal. Water and milk are better choices for strong teeth and bones.
- Avoid sticky candies (Starbursts, Skittles, fruit snacks, gummies, gummy vitamins, etc.).
 - ◇ Chocolate that melts easily or ice cream are better choices.
- Ensure that your child has adequate exposure to fluoride. Discuss your child's fluoride needs with Dr. Goodwine or your pediatrician.

Treatment

An appointment at this age 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 proper growth and development of your child until these teeth are naturally lost. Healthy teeth allow children to chew food more easily, learn to speak clearly, and smile with confidence.

If it is your first visit, you and your child will get to meet Dr. Goodwine and his experienced team. During this visit, we will complete a cleaning and a comprehensive exam. 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 it is a return visit to see Dr. Goodwine and our team, your child will get a dental checkup. Dr. Goodwine recommends dental checkups should be at least twice a year for most children. During the checkup, Dr. Goodwine will review your child's medical and dental history. He will gently examine your child's teeth and oral tissues. Their teeth will be cleaned by removing debris from both the teeth and gums. Hygiene instructions will be given to improve your child's brushing and flossing. X-rays are only taken when necessary to protect your child's dental health (see Radiograph section). Dr. Goodwine and his team will discuss the need for X-rays with you if any are

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taken. Parents usually ask that we speak to their child about “letting mom or dad help with their flossing and brushing at home.” Hearing this directly from our team works well for most children.

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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