

Why early childhood dental visits are important

The sooner children begin getting regular dental checkups, the healthier their mouths will stay throughout their lives. Early checkups help prevent cavities and tooth decay, which can lead to pain, trouble concentrating and other medical issues. Youngsters with healthy teeth chew food easily, learn to speak clearly and smile with confidence.

The American Dental Association and the American Academy of Pediatrics say that every child should visit a dentist by age 1 – or as soon as the first tooth appears. This “well baby visit” teaches parents and caregivers how to care for their children’s teeth and help them remain cavity-free.

For example, pediatric dentists see many young patients with cavities that came from falling asleep with a bottle of milk or juice. The dentist can tell the parent or caregiver:

- Why this causes decay -The importance of encouraging children to drink milk, water and juice from a cup as they approach their first birthday
- How to brush young teeth.-Dentists also encourage mothers to stop on-demand nighttime breastfeeding, after the child’s first teeth come through.

Here's when and how to care for those little choppers:

- Even before your baby starts teething, run a clean, damp washcloth over the gums to clear away harmful bacteria.
- Once your baby gets teeth, brush them with an infant toothbrush. Use water and a tiny bit of fluoride toothpaste (about the size of a grain of rice). Once your baby's teeth touch, you can begin flossing in between them.
- Around age 2, your child should learn to spit while brushing. Avoid giving your child water to swish and spit because this might make swallowing toothpaste more likely.
- Kids ages 3 and up should use only a pea-sized amount of fluoride toothpaste.
- Always supervise kids younger than 6 while brushing, as they are more likely to swallow toothpaste.

Even babies can develop tooth decay if good feeding habits aren't practiced. Putting a baby to sleep with a bottle might be convenient, but can harm the baby's teeth. When the sugars from juice or milk remain on a baby's teeth for hours, they can eat away at the enamel, creating a condition known as **bottle mouth**. Pocked, pitted, or discolored front teeth are signs of bottle mouth. Kids with severe cases might develop cavities and need all of their front teeth pulled (permanent teeth will grow in later).

Parents and childcare providers should help young kids set specific times for drinking each day because sucking on a bottle throughout the day can be equally damaging to young teeth. Babies as young as 6 months are encouraged to [switch from a bottle to a Sippy cup](#) (with a straw or hard spout). By 12 months of age, they'll have the [motor skills and coordination](#) to use the cup on their own.