



THE NATIONAL CENTER ON
Health

Brush Up on Oral Health

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Did You Know?

Mothers can pass the bacteria that cause tooth decay to their babies through saliva. This can happen when mothers test the temperature of milk in bottles or clean pacifier or bottle nipples in their mouths. Recommend that mothers try these practices instead:

- Test the temperature of milk in bottles by placing a few drops of it on their wrist
- Clean pacifier or bottle nipples with water



Babies' Oral Health: Start Care Early

Taking care of babies' oral health is important. Care should start before the baby's first tooth comes into the mouth. Healthy primary (baby) teeth help children chew nutritious foods and speak clearly. Primary teeth also make space for permanent (adult) teeth. A baby's first tooth usually comes in at around age 6 to 10 months. As soon as the first tooth comes in, a baby can develop tooth decay.

This issue of *Brush Up on Oral Health* focuses on oral health for babies (from birth to age

12 months) and what Head Start staff can do to help promote good oral health for babies.

Babies' Oral Health Begins Before Birth

Babies and children whose mothers have poor oral health are more likely to have tooth decay. Pregnant women should take care of any oral health problems before their baby is born. See the [December 2012 issue of *Brush Up on Oral Health*](#) for more information.

Care of Babies' Mouths

Head Start staff play an important role in the care of babies' mouths. In addition to cleaning babies' gums and teeth after feedings in Head Start settings, staff can educate pregnant women and parents on the best ways to care for their baby's mouth. Key advice Head Start staff can share includes:

- Clean the baby's gums even before the first tooth appears in the mouth. Use a clean, damp washcloth to wipe any remaining milk off the gums. Doing this at least twice a day, especially after night feeding, will also help the baby get used to having clean his or her mouth.
- After the baby's first tooth comes in, use an infant toothbrush with soft bristles and a small head. Put a smear of fluoridated toothpaste on the toothbrush, and brush the fronts and backs of the baby's teeth. Lift the baby's lip to brush at the gum line of the front teeth. The best time to brush teeth is in the morning and at bedtime.



Smear of Toothpaste

Preventing tooth decay and other oral health problems takes more than just brushing a baby's teeth with fluoridated toothpaste every day. Here are other ways to keep a baby's mouth healthy and to keep babies comfortable.

- Do not put a baby to sleep with a bottle or a sippy cup filled with breastmilk, formula, juice, or other drinks with sugar. These practices should be avoided because the sugar in the liquid stays on the baby's teeth, which can lead to tooth decay.
- Teething can make babies' gums sore. When babies are teething, they can be cranky, drool more than usual, and chew on their fingers or objects. To help a baby be more comfortable while teething, give him or her a cool teething ring, cool spoon, or cold, wet washcloth.
- Many babies suck their thumbs, fingers, hands, a pacifier, or another object such as a blanket or toy. Sucking is a normal baby reflex. It helps

babies feel secure and happy. Most children stop sucking between ages 2 and 4. If parents choose to have their baby suck a pacifier, Head Start staff can recommend several safety precautions:

- Clean the baby's pacifier with soap and water
- Replace the pacifier when it becomes worn or broken
- Do not dip a pacifier in sweetened foods or liquids (for example, sugar, honey, or syrup) because this can cause tooth decay
- Never clean a pacifier with saliva before giving it to the baby because the bacteria that can cause tooth decay can be passed to the baby
- Never attach a pacifier to a ribbon or string around the baby's neck because it might strangle the baby

The First Dental Visit

Babies should have their first dental visit by age 1. The dentist will check to make sure everything is normal and look for signs of tooth decay or other problems that may affect the baby's oral health. Also, the dentist will answer parents' questions about their baby's oral health. Going to the dentist at a young age helps children get used to visiting the dental office and receiving care.

Cook's Corner: Ideas for Healthy Foods

The best food for babies is breastmilk. If a baby is being fed infant formula, use formula with iron. Wait until babies are 1 year old before feeding them cow's, goat's, or soy milk.

Once babies can sit up with support and have good head and neck control, at about age 4 to 6 months, they can be introduced to solid foods.

Here are some healthy solid foods for babies:

At about age 4 to 6 months

- Iron-fortified single-grain infant cereal (for example, rice)
- Pureed meats
- Pureed fruits (for example, bananas or pears)
- Pureed vegetables (for example, peas, potatoes, or squash)



At about age 7 to 9 months

- Toast, crackers, and unsweetened dry cereal
- Cheese, cottage cheese, and yogurt

At about 10 to 12 months

- Most table foods (cut up or mashed so they can be chewed and swallowed easily) Note: avoid round, firm foods that could be choking hazards

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