



## Ensuring Your Child's Dental Health

During midnight feedings, the "terrible twos," and the pre-school years, oral health care is probably one of the last things on your mind, but you can ensure your child's healthy smile by helping him or her develop good habits during these early stages.

### Oral Care for Infants

You can begin oral care for your children before they are even born. Expectant mothers can help their children get a good start on oral health by eating a well-balanced diet during pregnancy. As part of this diet, expectant mothers should consume an adequate amount of dairy products, which are the best source of calcium. And as we all know, calcium helps to develop strong, healthy bones and teeth.

Once your child is born, you should start caring for his or her mouth immediately. After each feeding, wipe the baby's gums with a clean, damp cloth. This action will reduce the accumulation of plaque and establish oral care as part of the baby's daily routine.

Brushing should begin when the child's first tooth erupts. If toothpaste is used, use only a very small amount (no more than the size of a pea).

You should start taking your children to visit a dentist within six months of the eruption of the first tooth, and no later than the child's first birthday. During this early stage of development, the dentist can evaluate your child's oral health and provide tips and instructions on care.

To avoid early childhood tooth decay (often called baby bottle tooth decay), you should avoid giving your child a bottle of milk or juice when putting him or her to sleep. These sweet liquids will lie around your baby's teeth and allow acid to develop, which breaks down enamel. If you must give your child a bottle during these times, fill the bottle only with water.

### The Early Years

During the early years of your child's development, you should supervise his or her brushing routine. Make sure he or she only uses a small amount of toothpaste, spits out any remaining toothpaste after brushing and rinses with water. Also ensure that your child is brushing twice a day, unless your dentist recommends otherwise.

You should also help your child to use dental floss on his or her teeth. Flossing helps to remove plaque between teeth, where a toothbrush can't reach. As your child's permanent teeth erupt, ask your dentist about sealants. A sealant is a clear material that is applied to the chewing surfaces of the back of teeth where decay most often occurs. The sealant acts as a barrier, protecting teeth from bacteria and acid.

When your child's permanent teeth erupt, a thumbsucking habit can cause problems. This habit can cause improper growth of the mouth and tooth misalignment. If your child sucks his or her thumb, you should try to break the habit by the age of six or seven. Your dentist can give you tips on helping your child break this habit.

If your child is involved in sports or other recreational activities, make sure he or she uses the appropriate safety equipment (helmets, mouth protectors, etc) to protect his or her teeth and mouth. You can purchase these items in most sporting goods stores. Your dentist can also provide you with a custom fitted mouth protector for a better fit.

If you follow these simple guidelines, your child will grow-up with a happy, healthy smile.