

Look for Dr. Smith to make a second house call this year to explain oral health care for children ages 7 and up.

A child's first dental visit must be before his or her first birthday. If your dentist is not comfortable seeing a young child, then ask to be referred to a pediatric dentist or a general dentist who will.

Prevention is the best treatment

Tooth decay prevention must begin immediately after the baby's first feeding. Using a moist washcloth, wipe milk residue off the gum pads, and continue to do that after each feeding and once the primary teeth begin to appear to ensure that each surface of each tooth is thoroughly cleaned. If this procedure is completed every day, then dental decay should not occur.

Early childhood caries (tooth decay) can occur in a child as young as 9 months of age. Here's what it looks like: The top front teeth usually decay first when a baby is put to bed with a bottle filled with milk, juice, or other fluids (soda), or nursed all night. The teeth can also decay if a pacifier is dipped in sugar, honey, or jam.

Decay is an infection caused by the bacteria that live in the mouth using the sugars that are in the various fluids fed to the baby. These bacteria produce lactic acid as a waste product, which dissolves the enamel of the teeth and allows the bacteria to multiply and invade farther into the tooth until it reaches the pulp (nerve), causing toothache and leading to dental abscess and possible facial abscess.

A baby may be suffering from toothache if he or she is chronically fussy, has poor sleep patterns (waking up crying for no obvious reason), and is a fussy eater. Look at the baby's top front teeth (both the front and back). If they are broken and/or discolored, with white or dark spots, they likely are decayed and require immediate treatment.

Other problems relating to untreated dental infection

Teeth that are broken down due to decay or are lost early because they had to be extracted can result in the shifting forward of the remaining teeth and subsequent loss of space within the specific dental arch. The relationship between the teeth in the upper jaw and lower jaw is also compromised, resulting in a future poor bite relation (malocclusion). The result of this is the need for interceptive orthodontic treatment to regain the lost space and maintain the regained space until the permanent tooth erupts into the space. This may involve the use of removable retainer-like appliances or, in some cases, limited attached braces for a period of time, which would vary depending upon the treatment needed but could involve a number of months.

No parent should want a child to suffer the ravages of tooth decay, toothache, and jaw infection. Remember, prevention is the best treatment. **[OC]**

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Oral Health Care from Infancy through Kindergarten

Ages 6 Months to 3 Years

Common Problems

Bottle decay ♦ Falls and accidents ♦ Nutrition
♦ General decay ♦ Thumb and pacifier sucking

Ages 3 to 6

Common Problems

Decay ♦ Early tooth loss ♦ Space loss ♦ Accidents ♦ Grinding ♦ Canker sores ♦ Oral ulcers
♦ Lack of parent involvement in brushing and flossing ♦ Parental fear of dentists ♦ Pain, abscess, and facial infections ♦ Poor oral habits affecting jaw or tooth development (results of earlier thumb or pacifier sucking, etc.)

What Parents Can Do

Begin brushing when the first tooth appears ♦ Brush and floss your child's teeth until he or she is able
♦ Have younger children watch you brush your teeth ♦ Floss at least once a day, preferably before bed
♦ Replace toothbrush when worn (about every three months) ♦ Take your child for an early examination and routine checkups as needed ♦ Remember, toothpaste is not mandatory but brushing is; brush with water. ♦ Provide fluoride supplements if it is not in the water supply ♦ Observe and ask questions of the dentist ♦ Avoid promoting irrational fears of the dentist

What Dentists Can Do

Complete diagnosis ♦ Regular preventive care (plaque removal, flossing, fluoride treatment, education programs) ♦ Treatment as required ♦ Reinforce good oral habits for both parents and children
♦ Guide the eruption of the teeth ♦ Remove irrational fears through show and tell