

February is National Children's Dental Health Month – your child's teeth are so important! Early childhood caries (ECC, formerly known as baby bottle tooth decay) occurs when teeth are coated in almost any liquid (including milk, breast milk, formula, fruit juice and other sweet liquids) other than water for long periods. ECC occurs most commonly among babies who are put to bed with a bottle of formula or juice. ECC is defined as the presence of one or more decayed teeth, missing teeth (resulting from caries), or filled tooth surfaces in any primary tooth in a child 6 years old or younger. ECC can begin as early as the teeth begin to emerge (around 6 months or so), often progresses rapidly, and can cause great pain to the child.

After food enters the body, the bacteria can break down the carbohydrates, producing acids that cause mineral loss from teeth—a process that often results in cavities. ECC often requires extensive dental repair and left untreated, can destroy the child's teeth and have a strong, lasting effect on a child's overall general health.

ECC goes beyond pain and infection; ECC can affect speech and communication, eating and dietary nutrition, sleeping, learning, playing and quality of life, even into adulthood.

The American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry (AAPD) gives the following potential consequences of ECC:

- Higher risk of new carious lesions in both the primary (baby) and permanent teeth.
- Greater number of hospitalization and Emergency Room visits
- Increased treatment costs and time.
- Insufficient physical development (especially in height/weight).
- Loss of school days and increased days with restrictive activity.
- Diminished ability to learn.
- Diminished oral health-related quality of life.

The **AAPD** recommends the following steps for parents to help prevent children from getting Early Childhood Caries:

Infant

- Visit a pediatric dentist no later than the child's first birthday.
- Wipe infant's gums with a clean, wet gauze pad or washcloth after each feeding.

- Begin brushing infant's teeth as soon as first tooth appears twice daily with a fluoridated toothpaste and a soft, age-appropriate sized toothbrush. Parents should use a 'smear' of toothpaste to brush the teeth of a child less than two years of age.
- Twice-daily use has benefits greater than once-daily brushing.
- Do not breast feed for prolonged periods through the night. Research shows that breast milk by itself does not promote tooth decay. But breastfeeding infants who fall asleep while nursing with unswallowed milk in their mouths are also vulnerable to tooth decay. Make a point of removing your breast from your baby's mouth once she has fallen asleep.
- Infants should not be put to sleep with a bottle of milk, formula, sugar water, or fruit juice.
- If an infant falls asleep while feeding, the teeth should be cleaned before placing the child in bed.

Toddlers & Young Children

- Encourage children to drink from a cup by their first birthday; a training (sippy) cup is only meant to serve as a transitional tool from helping kids adjust from the bottle to cup.
- Only put water in sippy cups—except during mealtime. By filling the sippy cup with juice, or even milk, and allowing a child to drink from it throughout the day, bathes the child's teeth in cavity causing bacteria.
- Parents should dispense a 'pea-size' amount of toothpaste and perform or assist w/their child's tooth brushing.
- Supervise child when brushing and teach him/her to spit out, not swallow, the toothpaste.
- Help child develop good eating habits early and choose sensible, nutritious snacks.

Adapted from:

"Statistics on Recent Increases in Children's Tooth Decay." *American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry*. mychildrensteeth.org. 10 December 2015. <http://www.mychildrensteeth.org/assets/2/7/ECCstats.pdf>

"Breastfeeding After Your Baby gets Teeth." *American Academy of Pediatrics*. Healthychildren.org. 10 December 2015.