

Eating For Healthy Teeth

Diet plays an important role in the health of your child's teeth, so developing healthy eating habits early in life will help your child form the building blocks for strong and healthy adult teeth. Dental decay is becoming more common in young children, and this is related to changes in what and how some children eat.

Early Childhood Caries:

Did you know that as soon as your baby's first tooth erupts they are at risk of dental decay, which is known as Early Childhood Caries (ECC). The following tips can help prevent ECC in your child:

- Do not feed your children sugary food and drinks. These feed the bacteria in the plaque on the tooth surface. The bacteria then use sugars to produce acids which eat into the tooth and cause decay.
- With babies and toddlers do not put soft drink, cordial, sweetened milk or juice in infant bottles.
- Infant bottles should only contain breast milk, formula or boiled water.
- If your baby needs to suck on something to settle them to sleep, rather than a bottle, offer a dummy. Never put something sweet on it.
- Don't let your child take a bottle of milk or other sugary drinks to bed. When they are older, it is fine to place a glass of water on their bedside table in case they get thirsty overnight.
- Encourage your baby to learn to drink from a toddler cup from 6 months of age.
- Breast and bottle feeding regularly throughout the night once a child has teeth can contribute to ECC. Speak with your maternal and/or child health care adviser if your baby over 12 months of age still needs regular overnight feeds.


Good oral hygiene begins at birth. See the Australian Dental Association's fact sheet on oral hygiene for babies and toddlers for guidelines on cleaning your baby's gums and teeth at www.babyteeth.com.au. Start by gently wiping down their teeth with a moistened cloth before putting them to sleep.

What foods contribute to dental decay?

Foods high in refined carbohydrates (sugar and especially sucrose – sugar cane sugar), such as fruit snack bars, lollies, muesli bars, sweet biscuits, some breakfast cereals and sugary drinks and juices can contribute to dental decay, especially if eaten often and over long periods. This is because the sugar feeds the destructive bacteria in your baby's or toddler's mouth.

The decay causing bacteria thrive and produce acid which destroys your child's teeth. Highly refined packaged foods such as savoury crackers and chips can also have high levels of carbohydrate (sugar). Be sure to check the nutritional information panel on all packaged foods to help work out which foods and drinks have high carbohydrate and sugar levels. Eating such sugary foods can cause childhood obesity and the ADA supports the National Health and Medical Research Council's Infant Feeding Guidelines.

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For more information on caring for your teeth visit the ADA's website: www.ada.org.au



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While it's unrealistic to completely cut decay causing foods out of your child's diet, the ADA has tips to maximise your child's oral health:

- Your child should enjoy a wide variety of nutritious foods, especially foods rich in calcium and low in acids and sugars.
- Enjoy two healthy snacks a day such as fruit and a small portion of cheese – milk and hard cheeses such as cheddar have protective qualities which help prevent dental decay.
- Offer your child a diet high in fresh fruits and vegetables, wholegrain cereals, lean meats and dairy products.
- Limit the number of sugary snacks such as lollies, fruit bars and muesli bars, biscuits, dried fruit, cordials, juices and soft drink. The drinking of juices and other soft drinks (if necessary) should be limited to meal times.

Importantly, a healthy diet must be complemented by good oral hygiene - brushing and flossing teeth and regular dental check-ups. Daily flossing and brushing twice a day greatly reduces the risk of tooth decay. The use of fluoridated toothpaste depends on the age of your child – See the Australian Dental Association's fact sheet on oral hygiene for babies and toddlers for guidelines on using fluoridated toothpaste at www.babyteeth.com.au.

Let's brush up on some quick facts:

- Some medicines contain sugar for taste. If your child is prescribed medicine, ask your doctor if this can be sugar-free and not acidic.
- Foods containing sugar substitutes do not appear to increase decay risk. Ask your dentist if xylitol (a natural sweetener) containing products would be useful in reducing your children's risk of tooth decay.

- Fluoride is a natural element that strengthens teeth and protects against decay. Most towns and cities in Australia modify fluoride levels in the water supply to achieve recommended levels. Your dentist can tell you if your local water supply is fluoridated.
- Bottled water doesn't usually contain enough fluoride to offer protection against tooth decay. Some home water filters remove fluoride from tap water. Tank water does not contain fluoride. If your child drinks mostly bottled, filtered or tank water, then talk to your dentist about your child's fluoride needs. If necessary, your dentist can apply 'topical' fluoride to their teeth, which has been proven to reduce childhood tooth decay.
- Soft drinks can contribute greatly to tooth decay (and obesity) due to the significant amount of sugar they contain. A 600ml bottle can contain up to 13 teaspoons of sugar!
- Less well known is that soft drinks, even diet soft drinks, along with fruit juices, cordials and sports drinks often have high acid levels, and can play a major role in causing tooth erosion, which is where the soft drink dissolves the tooth structure.

Encouraging healthy eating and drinking habits in your child is the best way to help them have healthy teeth for life.

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www.ada.org.au