



Dental Health — A Guide to Healthy Teeth

The road to a bright smile begins long before the first tooth breaks through the gum. Parents play a big part in helping their children develop healthy teeth. Early monitoring by a pediatrician or dentist is important.

Steps to good dental health include:

- Regular care by a dental professional
- Getting enough fluoride
- Regular brushing and flossing
- Eating right

It's important for parents to care for their teeth too because cavity-causing bacteria can be easily transferred when sharing food or drinks. By following these steps and teaching them to your children, your entire family can benefit from good dental health.

Read more to learn why fluoride is important, when to start cleaning your child's teeth, if pacifier use or thumb sucking hurt teeth, about foods that can lead to tooth decay, about pediatric dentists, and good dental habits.

Fluoride is a natural chemical that can be added to drinking water and toothpaste. It strengthens **tooth enamel** (the hard outer coating on teeth). Fluoride also helps repair early damage to teeth.

The fluoride content of local water supplies varies. Check with your local water department to find out the exact water fluoride level in your area. Then talk with your child's pediatrician or dentist to see if she needs additional fluoride, such as fluoride drops or tablets. The need for fluoride is based on your child's **caries** (tooth decay) risk.

Daily dental cleaning should start as soon as your infant's first tooth appears. Wipe the teeth with a piece of gauze or a damp cloth. Switch to a toothbrush with a fluoride toothpaste as your child gets older. Because children tend to swallow toothpaste, put only a small (pea-sized) amount of fluoride toothpaste on your child's toothbrush and press the toothpaste into the bristles. Taking in too much fluoride while brushing can result in **fluorosis** (spotting of the teeth).

Also, check the teeth for early signs of tooth decay. Cavities appear as white, yellow, or brown spots or lines on the teeth. Any two teeth that are touching each other should be flossed to prevent a cavity from forming between the teeth. An ideal baby bite should have spaces between the front teeth. If your child's teeth are touching early, this is a sign that dental crowding may occur in the adult teeth that may require future orthodontic care.

Regular dental checkups, a balanced diet, fluoride, injury prevention, habit control, and brushing and flossing are all important for healthy teeth. Starting children off with good dental habits now will help them grow up with healthy smiles.

The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) recommends that all infants receive oral health risk assessments by 6 months of age. Infants at higher risk of early dental caries should be referred to a dentist as early as 6 months of age and no later than six months after the first tooth erupts or 12 months of age (whichever comes first).

All children should have a comprehensive dental exam by a dentist in the early toddler years.