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Oral health

It is vital to start caring for your child's teeth as soon as their first milk tooth starts to break through. There are many reasons for this and ways in which you can ensure your child has good oral health.

Shockingly, around one in four (23 per cent) of five-year-olds have experienced dental decay, according to statistics released by Public Health England in 2019. Also, the main reason for children being admitted to hospital for a general anaesthetic in the UK is for tooth extractions.

Concerns around young children's teeth has led to a requirement being added to the new EYFS which focuses on early years practitioners needing to promote good oral health in children. Your child's carers will be talking to them about the importance of caring for their teeth and the effects of eating too many sweet foods. Of course, they also need to be supported at home by you.

Why is oral health so important?

It's not all about having a nice smile, caring for your child's teeth and gums is essential because they play an important role in helping them to bite and chew food and to speak clearly. There is also evidence that poor oral health can lead to health problems later in life, not just oral but throughout the body.

Baby teeth tend to have thinner enamel so there is less protection against bacteria which can cause tooth decay. Although your child will naturally lose their first teeth, don't be complacent – severe decay can cause abscesses that may harm your child's permanent teeth. Also, children are more likely to develop crooked teeth if their baby teeth have been extracted.

Establishing a good dental routine while your child is young will help prevent them suffering the pain of decay and also set the foundation for your child taking care of their teeth into adulthood.

How do I establish a dental routine?

- Start regularly cleaning your child's teeth from when their first milk tooth breaks through.
- Brush their teeth for two to three minutes (you can get fun timers or it's about the length of a song) twice a day – perhaps after



breakfast and before they go to bed.

- The NHS recommends using just a smear of toothpaste for children under three-years-old whereas a pea-sized blob is adequate for children aged from three- to six-years-old.
- Look out for age-appropriate toothbrushes and toothpaste approved by the Oral Health Foundation or British Dental Association.
- Sit your baby on your knee or stand behind your child to clean their teeth.
- Angle the toothbrush to reach the gums and use a gentle, small circular motion.
- Show your child how to spit out excess toothpaste (don't rinse with water because this washes away the protective fluoride).
- As your child gets more capable, encourage them to look in a mirror and guide their hand so they can see and feel the correct action.
- Supervise toothbrushing until your child is at least seven-years-old.

What else can I do?

It's not just about keeping teeth clean, you can also avoid future oral problems by thinking about the food and drink your child consumes. Those containing high levels of sugar can cause dental decay.

It's good practice to avoid as much sugary food as possible and limit it to mealtimes, rather than snacking during the day. Be aware that even unsweetened juices and smoothies contain acids and sugars that can damage your child's teeth. Water is the best drink to give at bedtime because it doesn't contain natural sugars.

Teats and spouts encourage children to suck for long periods of time, which can affect the growth of your child's teeth and development of their jaw. They also result in drinks staying in contact with your child's teeth for longer which can increase damage. If your child uses a dummy, avoid dipping it in sugary substances. Start to wean your child off a dummy and bottle and onto a free-flow cup at six-months-old. **eye**

Further advice

The NHS has advice on dental health: <https://bit.ly/3uo75yg>

The Oral Health Foundation provides support and has a free helpline: 01788 539780 (local rates apply) <https://www.dentalhealth.org/>