

BABY BASICS

Five Simple And Surprising Rules For Childhood Oral Health

by Dr. Richard P. Mungo

(NAPSA)—This childhood disease strikes every day, yet it often goes unnoticed—and untreated—for years. Its effects begin in infancy and continue through the years, robbing our children of more than 51 million school hours every year.

What is this disease? Tooth decay. According to the U.S. Surgeon General, it is the most common childhood disease. It is five times more common than asthma, and seven times more common than hay fever.

Widely assumed to be an issue only for older children and adults, dental experts and physicians are spreading the word: Tooth decay can be prevented. And they are providing good, practical advice for parents: A lifetime of good dental health begins even before the baby teeth appear.

As part of an innovative program to enhance a child's overall health, Healthy Smiles for Kids of Orange County is helping spread the message. A project of the Children and Families Commission of Orange County in California, Healthy Smiles is aimed at even the youngest children, and provides information to help parents better care for their children's oral health. Research shows that good oral hygiene plays a more important role than we ever imagined in a child's long-term health, success and self-esteem.

The fundamentals of children's dental health can be summed up in five simple rules:

1. Care for your baby's oral health, even before baby teeth come in. The first step toward a healthy mouth for a lifetime is getting an early start. It's easy—using a damp washcloth, softly



For infants, good oral hygiene starts even before the first teeth come in.

wipe your infant's gums after every meal. When your child's first tooth appears, switch to a soft toothbrush.

2. See the dentist sooner rather than later. Schedule an appointment with the dentist anytime after the appearance of your child's first tooth, which usually arrives before his or her 9-month birthday. Parents who are already wiping their child's gums after meals will enjoy an extra advantage at that first visit to the dentist, since their babies will already be accustomed to the feeling of someone else's fingers inside their mouths.

3. Make certain your baby gets the right amount of fluoride. We all know that fluoride prevents tooth decay, but too much fluoride can cause discoloration of a child's teeth. To avoid excessive fluoride, use baby tooth cleaning products instead of fluoride toothpaste for children under age 2. For children age 2 to 8, use

no more than a pea-sized drop of fluoride toothpaste. Finally, avoid fluoride supplements unless you know all the sources of fluoride (water, formula, infant dry cereals) your child already takes in. This can be established in consultation with your pediatric dentist.

4. Establish good brushing habits. Just like adults, children should brush their teeth and gums at least twice a day. Remember, small children, under the age of 8 years, do not possess the dexterity to brush as well as adults. Parental supervision is very important. Flossing should begin when the spaces between the baby molars close down, usually at age 4 to 5 years. Teach children that they must floss regularly, and show them how to go between and around their teeth with the floss.

5. Practice good nutrition for healthy teeth and gums. We do not recommend that you put your baby to bed with a milk bottle, but if you do, use only water, not milk, juice or sugar water. Just like hard candy sweets, these can contribute to tooth decay, especially when the child falls asleep with the drink still in his mouth.

Parents interested in more information may visit the American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry Web site at www.aapd.org, or the Children and Families Commission of Orange County's Web site at www.occhildrenandfamilies.com.

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