

Your child's growing smile

Even before you can see them, your child's teeth have begun to form under the gingivae (gums). As early as six months after your baby is born, you may begin to see the first teeth erupt. And that's just the start of a lifelong smile.

CARING FOR PRIMARY TEETH

The first set of teeth, called "primary" teeth (often referred to as "baby" teeth), are important and should be cared for. These teeth not only help your baby chew and eventually speak, but also they help the jaw develop and save room for the permanent teeth, which start to come in at about the age of 6 or 7 years. Because the gums can become sore as the teeth are coming into place, your baby may be uncomfortable and fussy. You might try rubbing the gums gently with your finger or giving the baby a cool teething ring on which to chew. Teething gels also are available. (Note: The U.S. Food and Drug Administration¹ advises that products containing benzocaine should not be used for children younger than 2 years except under the advice and supervision of a health care professional.) Talk with your dentist about other ways to make your child more comfortable.

As with adult teeth and gums, your baby's teeth and gums should be cleaned. To familiarize your baby with this, wipe his or her gums with a moist, soft cloth or piece of gauze after every meal. As soon as the first tooth comes into place, start brushing with a soft-bristle toothbrush designed for babies. Use water rather than a fluoride toothpaste for children younger than 2 years, unless a health care professional recommends fluoride. Once the child is able to spit, he or she may be ready to brush his or her own teeth by using a pea-sized amount of fluoride toothpaste while you supervise. Have the child spit out the toothpaste.

Caries (tooth decay) can develop in a baby's teeth. For this reason, you should limit the time during which teeth are exposed to drinks containing sugar—such as juice, formula or even milk—which can encourage caries development. Never put your child to bed with a bottle or "sippy" cup containing these liquids. Likewise, don't dip your child's pacifier in honey

or any other sweetener.

The American Dental Association recommends that you bring your baby to the dentist after the first tooth comes in and no later than the child's first birthday. This is known as a "well-baby checkup." It allows your dentist to check for tooth decay and other things that may affect the teeth, including habits such as thumb sucking. He or she also can show you how to clean your baby's teeth properly.

CARING FOR PERMANENT TEETH

The permanent teeth should start erupting when your child is 6 or 7 years old and will continue to erupt throughout the teenage years and possibly even during early adult years. Brushing twice a day with a fluoride-containing toothpaste and cleaning between the teeth once daily with floss or another interdental cleaner will be important habits to adopt. Limiting snacks and sugary foods and drinks also will go a long way toward keeping the teeth healthy.

Regular dental checkups are essential. They enable your dentist to identify problems, such as caries, and begin treatment as soon as possible. They also allow for professional cleanings and fluoride applications that will keep the teeth strong. Your dentist may apply dental sealants to the chewing surfaces of your child's back teeth to offer further protection against caries. These chewing surfaces have deep pits and grooves in which food and plaque can build up and destroy the enamel surface of your child's teeth.

Caring for your child's mouth, even before you can see his or her teeth, is key to good oral health. Talk with your dentist about ways to give your child a healthy smile for life. ■

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"For the Dental Patient" provides general information on dental treatments to dental patients. It is designed to prompt discussion between dentist and patient about treatment options and does not substitute for the dentist's professional assessment based on the individual patient's needs and desires.

1. U.S. Food and Drug Administration. Benzocaine topical products: sprays, gels and liquids—risk of methemoglobinemia. www.fda.gov/safety/medwatch/safetyinformation/safetyalertsforhumanmedicalproducts/ucm250264.htm. Accessed Nov. 28, 2011.