

## **GOOD ORAL HEALTH FOR THE INFANT AND CHILD**

Good oral health is an important part of the infant's and child's overall health. The foundation of good oral health in adults is established right from the infant stage. Inculcating good lifestyle habits and regular dental care in infants goes a long way to creating a strong foundation for a lifetime of good oral health.

*Why are baby (also known as primary) teeth important?*

Some people believe that baby teeth are not important and therefore, do not require the same amount of care as adult or permanent teeth, as they are only in a person's mouth for 6 to 10 years before they are replaced by the permanent or adult teeth.

This, however, cannot be further from the truth.

Primary teeth allow the child to eat and chew properly, which is critical for maintaining good nutrition for the growing child. Baby teeth are also important for speech development and maintaining the space required for the eruption of permanent teeth into their ideal positions at the right time. Not having teeth can also have deleterious effects on a child's self-esteem.

Decay of the primary teeth can cause great distress to a child, like an adult suffering from a toothache. If serious enough, tooth decay may be so extensive as to require root canal treatment or even extraction. Early loss of baby teeth disrupts the eruption pattern of permanent teeth and may give rise to crooked and/or impacted teeth in the permanent dentition, which will need expensive orthodontic or surgical treatment in future to correct.

Badly decayed primary teeth can also give rise to infections, which can then affect the development of the underlying permanent teeth. These affected permanent teeth may become discoloured, have surface defects or even end up being demineralised. The latter results in a tooth that is prone to acid attack and decay, and this usually means needing either prolonged dental treatment or even tooth loss.

*What is caries?*

Caries is decay caused by bacteria (mutans streptococci) acting on fermentable carbohydrates such as sugar found in food debris. Liquids that contain fermentable carbohydrates are, for examples, juice, milk, formula and soft drinks.

The majority of the bacteria that infants acquire are from their mother's or caretaker's saliva. This comes from intimate contact with the infant through kissing, sharing of utensils and blowing on food to cool it down while feeding. Infants and toddlers whose mothers or caretakers have high levels of mutans streptococci are at a greater risk of acquiring the decay-causing bacteria than children whose mothers have low levels.

Hence, good dental health and hygiene should start with mummy prenatally. It is important for mothers and caregivers to have good oral hygiene, and be educated dentally so as to establish healthy oral habits for their children.

*What is Baby Bottle or Nursing caries?*

This is also known as Early Childhood Caries (ECC) by dental professionals. In children younger than 3 years of age, any sign of decay on the surface of the teeth other than the biting surface is indicative of this disease. The surfaces most commonly affected are on the front surface of the upper front teeth, as well as in between the baby molars. More often than not, a few teeth are decayed simultaneously as baby teeth are not as highly mineralised as permanent teeth.

Children with ECC have high levels of mutans streptococci, or have poor feeding or oral hygiene habits, or a combination of these. In infants, the immune system is not fully developed and hence, if there are high levels of bacteria or too much sugar or fermentable carbohydrates in the diet, combined with poor cleaning habits, the infant is at a higher risk of developing ECC.

It has also been shown in some research that infants or toddlers with ECC have a greater risk of developing decay as an adult and also grow at a slower pace compared to other infants without ECC.

*How can we prevent ECC or decay in the infant or child?*

The most common cause for ECC is bottle feeding before bedtime or during the night. Infants should not be put to sleep with a bottle, especially if it contains milk, juice or a sugary drink, as repeated, intermittent drinking from the bottle (unless it contains water) offers opportunities for bacteria acid attack on the teeth. This habit is unfortunately, prevalent in most households as a convenient means by tired parents to pacify a fretful child.

This habit of feeding-at-will exposes your child to repeated sugar exposure and bacteria acid attacks. The reduced salivary flow during sleep will also limit the neutralising and diluting effects of saliva. Hence, do not allow your child a bottle to suck at intermittently in bed unless it contains only water.

Parents should also encourage their infants to drink from a cup as they approach their first birthday. It is recommended that infants be weaned from the bottle at 12-14 months of age.

If your child is breastfed, feeding on demand at night is also discouraged after the first primary tooth is out (at about 6 months of age). If you need to feed at night, wipe over your infant's teeth with a damp, clean wash cloth after each feed.