

Although your new baby's first tooth fairy visit may be a few years off, it's never too early to begin teaching your child about good oral health.



Infants

Following birth, oral care should begin immediately for your child. After every feeding, gently wipe your baby's gums with a clean, damp cloth to reduce plaque buildup and establish oral care.

Brushing should begin when your infant's first tooth erupts. Each child's progression through this stage will vary—most children will see the lower central incisors (front bottom teeth) grow in first. You should also start taking your infant to the dentist within 6 months of first tooth eruption. Your dentist can provide tips and instruction on proper oral care for you and your baby's needs.

To avoid baby bottle tooth decay, don't give your baby a bottle of milk or juice at bedtime. These liquids will lie on the teeth throughout the night, allowing acid to develop, which breaks down tooth enamel and eventually results in tooth decay.

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Toddlers

During the toddler stage, supervise your child's oral routine and continue to encourage good oral care. Around age 2 to 3, the last of your child's baby teeth should be coming in.

Be sure your toddler brushes at least twice a day, uses a small amount of toothpaste, spits out any remaining paste and rinses with water. (Toothpaste can also be introduced when a child turns 2 or when your dentist recommends.) It may help if a parent does the final brushing to ensure all food debris is removed. Also, floss your toddler's teeth daily to prevent plaque buildup between the teeth where a toothbrush can't reach.

Make oral hygiene fun to ensure that your children will take care of their teeth forever. Provide a fun toothbrush, brush with your child or brush to music.

Check with your dentist for more helpful tips for your toddler's teeth.

Young Children

Now is a great time to continue to help your active child maintain good oral care. Around their 6th or 7th birthdays, most children start to lose baby teeth and permanent teeth begin to take their place—an exciting time for children and their parents.

To keep baby and permanent teeth healthy, be sure that your child rinses with water after every meal, brushes at least twice a day and has regular dental

check-ups. Go over their teeth after brushing to make sure that all particles are removed, especially from the grooves in molars.

This is also a great time to encourage mouth-healthy eating. Calcium is important for developing strong bones and teeth, and healthy snacks are better than sugary treats that promote tooth decay. Limit snacking—frequent snacks between meals continually coat the teeth in sugar, creating acid that gradually wears away the hard enamel that protects the teeth.

Consult with your dentist to ensure that your child is receiving the proper amount of fluoride to help prevent tooth decay.

Pre-Teens/Teenagers

By about 13, the average teenager should have approximately 28 permanent teeth (with only the wisdom teeth left to come in). For an image-conscious teen, the idea of teeth stains, missing teeth and bad breath are ample reason to keep up good oral care. But, the general lifestyles of most teens can put them at risk of dental decay and other oral health issues.



For instance, did you know that the average 12- to 19-year-old male drinks approximately 868 cans of soft drinks a year?*

Sports drinks and juices are no better—they have been found to damage teeth when consumed in large amounts. To limit the harmful effects of soft drinks on teens' teeth, encourage them to sip with a straw pointed toward the back of the mouth and always rinse the mouth with water afterwards.

Life is usually on-the-go for most teens, which means that snacking, especially on junk foods, is common and convenient. Have your teen carry a travel-size toothbrush, chew sugarfree gum and drink plenty of water throughout the day to cleanse the mouth.

Stock your bathroom with plenty of floss and toothpastes and your kitchen with teeth-healthy foods like fruits, veggies and cheese to encourage a family of healthy smiles.

Additional related information can be found on the Web sites of the Academy of General Dentistry, www.agd.org and the American Dental Association, www.ada.org; and in Oral Health in America: A Report of the Surgeon General, 2000.

*Academy of General Dentistry, 2006.

