



## February is National Children's Dental Health Month

Whether you are a parent, guardian, or grandparent, having children means you stay busy, and sometimes so busy that dental health is overlooked. Developing good habits at an early age can help prevent the development of bad habits in the future. Good dental habits should begin before your child's first tooth.

### Facts

- Nearly half of the four million children born annually in the United States will have tooth decay by the time they reach second grade.
- Many children under five years old undergo general anesthesia to have dental work due to dental disease.
- Tooth decay (dental caries) affects children in the United States more than any other chronic infectious disease. Untreated tooth decay causes pain and infections that may lead to problems such as eating, speaking, playing, and learning.

### Simple Steps for Kids' Smiles

- **Foods and drinks matter.** Milk, formula, juice, and other drinks such as soda all have sugar in them. Sugary liquids that stay on your child's teeth too long can lead to tooth decay. So get in the habit early – refrain from putting your child to bed with a bottle. Provide healthy and nutritional snacks such as fruits and vegetables. Avoid foods high in sugar content. Save cookies and other treats for special occasions.
- **Start cleaning teeth early.** As soon as the first tooth appears, begin cleaning by wiping with a clean, damp cloth every day. When more teeth come in, switch to a small, soft toothbrush.

Begin using toothpaste with fluoride when the child is 2 years old. Use toothpaste with fluoride earlier if your child's doctor or dentist recommends it. Show a good example by brushing and flossing twice a day. Make teeth brushing a fun time!

- **Supervise brushing.** Brush your child's teeth twice a day until your child has the skill to handle the toothbrush alone. Then continue to closely watch brushing to make sure the child is doing a thorough job and using only a small amount of toothpaste. Check your child's teeth for spots or stains in addition to the regular check ups and cleanings performed at the dentist.
- **Use the right amount of fluoride toothpaste.** Fluoride is important for fighting cavities, but use only a small amount of toothpaste (about the size of a pea). Teach your child to spit out the toothpaste and to rinse well after brushing. Use free printable brushing charts for encouragement.
- **Talk to your child's doctor or dentist.** Sealants are a plastic coating that can be applied over those hard-to-reach areas to provide extra protection against plaque and bacteria. The combination of dental sealants and fluoride has the potential to nearly eliminate tooth decay in school-age children so check with the doctor or dentist about your child's specific needs.

An important part of preventive care is your child's first visit to the dentist. A child who perceives the dental team as a friend rather than a foe will find visits much easier, and is more likely to continue the life-long habit of regular dental cleanings. So be sure to get your child off to a good start with early dental visits, proper tooth brushing, and of course, a lot of smiling!