Your Child’s Visit to the Dentist

Open Door HEALTH CENTER
Your Community Health Center
Your child’s visit to the dentist

It is very important to take care of your gums and teeth and it’s especially important to take care of your young child’s gums and teeth. Brushing your child’s teeth, feeding him or her healthy foods, and taking your child to the dentist can help his or her teeth to be healthy.

Begin dental visits early

Protect your child’s teeth by having checkups early. It is recommended by the American Dental Association (ADA) and the American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry (AAPD) that children should have their first dental visit around the time their first tooth appears but no later than their first birthday.

Your dental team (dentist, dental hygienist, dental therapist) can show you how to properly clean your child’s teeth and mouth, offer advice on diet and pacifier use, and recommend products to try. Your dental team can also explain how to avoid injuries to your child’s teeth and mouth and what to do in case of a dental emergency. The dentist can also help make sure your child is getting the right amount of fluoride, a natural mineral that protects teeth.

When your child is a toddler, the dental team will gently examine his or her gums and teeth, checking for decay or other problems. Your child may also have his or her teeth cleaned. This is a good time to check for other problems related to habits such as thumb or finger sucking.

Fluoride treatments and dental sealants are two very important ways your dental team can prevent cavities. Your dental team will let you know if these treatments are recommended for your child. Dental sealants are coatings that are applied in the grooves of your child’s adult teeth to protect them from decay.
Healthy teeth help a child speak and chew. Baby teeth also hold space for adult teeth. Young children really like to brush their own teeth, however, Open Door Health Center recommends brushing your child’s teeth until he or she is 7 or 8 years old.

**Tooth decay starts early**

Tooth decay can start as soon as your child’s first tooth appears. It is very important to start taking care of your child’s teeth as soon as you see the teeth peeking through the gums. If your child has decay, he or she can suffer from pain and infection. If a child is in pain, he or she may have trouble eating, sleeping and learning.

**What causes tooth decay?**

Decay-causing bacteria is in everyone’s mouths. Babies get this bacteria from their parents, just as we all are exposed to germs in our families. This decay-causing bacteria then sticks to your child’s teeth. Brushing the teeth to remove this bacteria is very important. The bacteria on our teeth use the sugar in foods and drinks, and turn it into acid, causing cavities. Each time your child eats or drinks, this acid can attack the teeth for 20 minutes or longer after eating or drinking. Over time, enamel gets damaged, tooth decay develops, and cavities appear.

Children are more likely to get decay when their teeth are exposed to sugar often and for long periods of time.

**Babies should not be put to bed with a bottle of milk, formula or juice.** If your child falls asleep with a bottle in his or her mouth, the liquid in the bottle pools around the teeth and causes decay. Fruit juice, soda and even milk contain sugar. Plain water is the best option in a bottle or sippy cup at the end of the day!
Why are baby teeth so important?

Baby teeth are also called primary teeth; they are very important in the growth and development of a child. Baby teeth help your child speak and chew food. They also hold space for adult teeth that are growing under the gums. If a baby tooth is lost early, the teeth beside it may drift into the empty space and not leave enough room for adult teeth to come in, which causes crowding.

If your child loses a tooth early, the dentist may recommend a space maintainer, which is a plastic or metal retainer that holds the space open for the permanent tooth to erupt. Once the adult tooth begins to appear, the dentist will remove the space maintainer.

Tips to avoid decay

- Don’t let your baby or toddler fall asleep with a bottle of milk, formula, breastmilk, juice or pop.
- If your child needs comfort between feedings or at bedtime, give him or her a pacifier; never dip a pacifier in sugar or honey.
- Do not put the pacifier in your mouth to clean it and then put in the baby’s mouth. You can pass on decay-causing bacteria to the baby.
- Do not allow children to frequently sip sugary liquids from bottles or sippy cups as this can lead to decay. Even watered-down sugary drinks, such as juice, can cause decay. Offer your child fluoridated water throughout the day.

Give your child healthy foods like fruits, vegetables, whole-grain products like bread or crackers & dairy products (milk, yogurt & cheese). Lean meats, fish, chicken, eggs & beans are also good for children.

Space Maintainers

Space left by the early loss of a baby tooth
Band and loop space maintainer cemented to baby tooth next to the space
Adult teeth buds

Baby tooth
Babies are born without teeth, they have 20 baby teeth hidden in their jaws. Their first teeth usually start to appear in the mouth around 6 months old. The front two upper and two lower teeth usually appear first. By the child’s third birthday, most children have their full set of 20 baby teeth. By the age of 5 to 6, the adult teeth begin to erupt, or come in. When teething, some babies may have tender or sore gums, some things that can help soothe this are:

- Gently rubbing gums with a clean finger, a small cool spoon or wet gauze
- Letting your child chew on a clean teething ring

Talk to your doctor or dentist if your child is still cranky or uncomfortable when teething.

The chart below is a general guideline for primary teeth: when they come in (erupt) and fall out (are shed). Baby teeth are replaced by permanent (adult) teeth. Your child’s teeth may erupt earlier or later than this picture; every child is different.
How to keep your child’s teeth healthy

Children learn their habits from their parents. It is up to you to start good habits by cleaning your child’s teeth every day, feeding your child a healthy diet and taking him or her to the dentist regularly.

It is recommended by the ADA that you brush your child’s teeth for him or her until they are 6 years old. ODHC recommends continuing to brush your child’s teeth until he or she is 7-8 years old. As a general rule, if children can’t tie their own shoes, they need parents to help them brush their teeth. When they are old enough, continue to watch them so they aren’t missing areas. Children should also be taught to spit out toothpaste, not to swallow it. Floss your child’s teeth once daily when you see they have two teeth that touch.

Wipe your baby’s gums with a clean, wet gauze pad or washcloth after each feeding. This not only helps your child get used to having their mouth cleaned but it also helps remove food that can harm teeth when they are starting to come in.

As soon as you see your baby’s first tooth coming in, start brushing the teeth twice a day. Use a soft-bristled, child-sized toothbrush and a fluoride toothpaste. Until the child is three years old use no more than a smear of fluoride toothpaste. For children older than three, use no more than a pea-sized amount of fluoride toothpaste.

Tips for a positive dental visit

- Schedule your child’s first dental appointment before his or her first birthday.
- Schedule a morning appointment if possible, when children tend to be more rested and cooperative. Don’t schedule during nap time.
- Stay positive for your child; don’t show or share any anxiety that you might feel about dental visits.
- Never bribe your child to go to the dentist or use the visit as a punishment or threat.
- Make your child’s first dental visit a fun one!

Teaching your child good oral hygiene habits early can lead to a lifetime of good oral health!
Place the toothbrush at a 45-degree angle to the gums.

Move the brush back and forth gently in short strokes.

Brush the outer surfaces, the inside surfaces and the chewing surfaces of all teeth.

To clean the inside surface of the front teeth, tilt the brush vertically and make several up-and-down strokes.

Brush your tongue with sweeping motions from back to front. This removes bacteria and keeps your breath fresh.

Use about 18 inches of floss wound around one of your middle fingers, with the rest wound around the opposite middle finger.

Hold the floss tightly between the thumbs and forefingers and gently insert it between the teeth.

Curve the floss into a “C” shape against the side of the tooth.

Rub the floss gently up and down, keeping it pressed against the tooth. Don’t jerk or snap the floss.

Floss all your teeth. Don’t forget to floss behind your back teeth.
Dr. Flossie helps Wally floss his teeth, and reminds him to brush and floss every day.