

Baby Bottle Tooth Decay

Parents of infants may not realize that as soon as a baby's teeth appear in the mouth, they are susceptible to decay. Comforting a fussy baby during the day or putting your baby to sleep with a bottle can lead to a pattern of serious, early tooth decay known as baby bottle tooth decay. The same condition can also result from prolonged on-demand breastfeeding or use of a sippy cup.

A Sugary Culprit!

Baby bottle tooth decay, also called nursing caries, is a condition that can destroy the teeth of an infant. The condition is caused when the child's teeth are frequently exposed to sugary liquids for long periods. Milk, including breast milk, formula, fruit juice (real or artificial), and other sweetened liquids are all potential culprits.

Plaque attack!

Teeth are covered by a thin, sticky film called plaque. Bacteria in plaque use sugar to produce acids, which then attack the tooth enamel. Each time your child drinks any liquid containing sugars, acid demineralizes the teeth for at least 20 minutes. When these "acid attacks" are frequent and repeated, the teeth do not have the opportunity to recover and tooth decay occurs.

Timing Matters!

It's not just what children drink, but how often and for how long their teeth are exposed to decay-causing acids that matters. Drinking from a bottle or sippy cup several times a day increases the frequency or number of acid attacks. In the same way, allowing your child to fall asleep with a bottle during a nap or at night can also harm the teeth, even if your child only uses the bottle when he or she first falls asleep. While sleeping, the flow of saliva decreases, allowing sugary liquids to collect and remain around the teeth. Even a thin film of milk left on the teeth while sleeping is potentially very harmful.

Moderate decay
affecting the upper front teeth



Severe decay
affecting the front and back teeth

How to prevent baby bottle tooth decay!

Sometimes parents do not realize that baby teeth are susceptible to decay as soon as they appear in the mouth. By the time the decay is noticed, it may be too late to save the child's teeth. Many parents mistake decay for "chips" in their child's teeth. The following tips will help prevent baby bottle tooth decay from occurring in your child:

- After each feeding, wipe the child's teeth and gums with a damp washcloth or gauze pad to remove plaque. Begin brushing your child's teeth as soon as the first tooth erupts while continuing to clean and massage the gums in other areas that remain toothless. Flossing should begin when any teeth are in side-to-side contact.
- Never allow your child to fall asleep with a bottle containing milk, formula, fruit juices, or sweetened liquids.
- Watch what you give your baby between regular feedings. Try comforting your baby with a bottle filled only with cool, plain water or a clean pacifier (never dip a pacifier in any sweet liquid!).
- Make sure your child gets fluoride in their water needed to reduce the risk of cavities.
- Try to limit the intake of milk and juices to mealtimes only. Sweet drinks, like chocolate milk and any juices, should be given as treats rather than routine beverages.
- Wean your child from the bottle or on-demand breastfeeding at 12-14 months of age. Plan ahead by diluting the bottle with increasing amounts of water every day.
- Visit the dentist by the child's first birthday. Although this may seem early, the dentist can check if you are cleaning your child's teeth properly or if there are any problems with his or her teeth. Regular dental visits every 6 months are important to monitor tooth development, check for cavities, and accustom your child to the dental office.

By spending a few minutes each day to care for your child's teeth, you are greatly helping your child's smile get off to a healthy start.