

A Primer on Primary TEETH



A bottle before bedtime? Not a good idea, if there's milk or juice inside.

By Dr. Jeffrey Ginsberg

Your child's first teeth, aptly named "baby teeth", usually erupt between 6 to 12 months of age, and continue coming through until age 3. While it is true that your child will lose all his baby (the fancy dental term is "primary") teeth, this will happen over a very long time period, long after your baby has grown. Baby teeth are still present in your child's mouth until some time between age 11 and 15! Baby teeth are essential for eating and speaking, and visual appearance, as well as for laying the foundation for proper growth and development of permanent teeth. If a baby tooth is lost prematurely, the other teeth can shift and not allow new teeth to grow in properly. An untreated cavity in a baby tooth can lead to an infection in your child's mouth — causing pain, swelling, and possibly damage the permanent tooth.

The most common cause of early decay is from falling asleep with a bottle containing milk, juice or formula; when a baby falls asleep with a bottle, the sweet liquids bathe the teeth all night. The tongue protects the lower teeth but upper teeth often show signs of severe decay. Infants as young as 6 months old can have *Baby Bottle Tooth Decay (Nursing Caries)*. Such decay might require fillings or even crowns (caps) if severe. The best way to prevent this is to brush daily and avoid giving your child juice or

milk right before bedtime. If your child takes a bottle or breast, try to give it prior to brushing and then offer a bottle of water before bedtime.

When to begin baby's dental hygiene? As soon as teeth appear in the baby's mouth, they must be cleaned daily.

Most children under 3 do not like to have anything or anyone in their mouth except for food (and, of course, small objects that you do not want in their mouth)! To make tooth brushing a little more tolerable, parents can move it out of the bathroom and into the living room or family room with music or a video playing as a distraction. Sit the infant or child on one parent's lap and lay his head back on the other parent's lap. One parent can hold the child's hands and amuse him, while the other parent brushes the teeth. Don't worry, it is perfectly normal for a 16-month-old to cry and squirm when you are brushing his teeth. Another technique for older babies is to have the child hold a toothbrush with a parent's hand guiding the brush while reading a story or watching a video. Teeth should be cleaned twice a day: in the morning, and especially before the baby goes to bed for the night. If the wrestling match becomes too much for you, make sure you brush at least once a day before bedtime.

JEFFREY GINSBERG, D.M.D. is a specialist in pediatric dentistry, in Yorktown Heights. He can be reached at (914) 245-1670 or online at www.drjeffdentist4kids.com.