

Smile, baby!

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First Years (0-2)

Your baby's first tooth is the first step to a beautiful smile. A transition from a gummy smile to a gleeful grin of pearly whites is a long one and a process that needs careful attention to detail.

Primary teeth are important for a number of reasons. Not only do they preserve the space needed when the permanent ones arrive, they help your child begin to talk and chew.

Although temporary, first teeth, if not cared for properly, can also affect your child's biting, speaking and physical appearance, and may lead to gum disease.

Two advance precautions:

- > Have the fluoride levels checked in your family's main supply of water; the same applies for bottled water.
- > Start cleaning out your child's mouth even before teeth arrive, using a warm, wet washcloth. Teach her early on that ongoing oral hygiene is a lifelong, essential part of staying healthy.

Teeth that arrive at birth are called neonatal teeth. "Keep them if possible, but they may have to be removed if they become detached, interfere with feeding or irritate the tongue or lips," says Paul Chon, DDS, a Santa Ana-based dentist.



Usually the first two teeth appear at 3 to 9 months; your baby may become fussy, and gums may be swollen. Give her a teething ring or something hard to chew on. Teething is a normal growth step with one tooth "erupting" roughly each month. By age 3, all 20 primary teeth should be in place and begin falling out by age 6.

As soon as the first teeth begin to appear, use a wet piece of gauze twice daily or a non-fluoride paste. At age 3, use a pea-sized drop of fluoride toothpaste and a toothbrush designed for infants. Infants and toddlers cannot brush effectively, so don't let them swallow excess toothpaste. Watch out for cavities. Use only water at bedtime and after meals. Limit sugars and starches, and don't forget to gently floss.

Call your dentist if you notice bouts of crying, unusual pain, gum inflammation or excessive drooling.

By your child's first birthday, teach her how to drink from a sipping cup, and schedule her first visit with a dentist.

"If possible, both parents should attend; one can focus and listen to the dentist while the other tends to your child," says Chon. "If both cannot be there, recruit another adult, but no other children."

Chon is a proponent of the Tooth Fairy myth.

"I think it's fun and kids love it," he says. paulchondds.com



RULE OF THUMB

Thumb sucking is a natural reflex that begins in the womb.

It's comforting and relaxing, and may induce sleep more quickly. However, after age 5, it should be discouraged. It can interfere with mouth development and teeth alignment, and adversely affect the roof of the mouth.

Try regular feeding and sleeping schedules, quality interaction with Mom and Dad, a variety of safe and interesting toys, and a happy and stimulating day-care environment. Finally, plan daily activities and routines to reduce stress and boredom.

By ensuring that your 5-year-old understands that you want him to practice self-control and quit because it's best for him, he'll gain a sense of accomplishment and self-confidence – and that's something to smile about.

GOOD ORAL HEALTH: START OUT RIGHT!

The earlier, the better when teaching your children good dental habits. Here are a few things every parent should know about protecting their children's oral health:

- > **Dental care should start early. Tooth decay in babies can lead to pain, infection, malnutrition and much more.**
- > **Parents should begin brushing their children's teeth as soon as the first tooth arrives.**
- > **Regular checkups help identify problems early and lower costs. They also help parents and dentists begin to plan for crowded, missing and crooked teeth.**
- > **Parents should check to see if their employer provides dental insurance. Other options include voluntary dental insurance (paid by the employees at a lower group rate), individual dental policies and state-funded or local community health programs.**

Source: Dr. Gene Sherman, senior vice president at AlwaysCare Benefits (a Starmount Life Insurance Co.), worked for more than 17 years as a dentist in private practice.