

# PEDIATRIC UNIT

## Dental Health and Hygiene for Children

As you might guess, the number-one dental problem among preschoolers is **tooth decay**.

- One out of 10 2-year-olds already have one or more cavities
- By age 3, 28% of children have one or more cavities
- By age 5, nearly 50% of children have one or more cavities

Many parents assume that cavities in **baby teeth** do not matter, because they will be lost anyway. That is not true. Dental decay in baby teeth can negatively affect permanent teeth and lead to future dental problems.

### Teaching Good Dental Habits

The best way to protect your child's teeth is to teach him or her good dental habits. With the proper coaching they will quickly adopt good oral hygiene as a **part of their daily routine**. However, while they may be an enthusiastic participant, they will not yet have the control or concentration to brush their teeth all by themselves.

You will need to supervise and help them so that the brush removes all the **plaque – the soft, sticky, bacteria-containing deposits that accumulate on the teeth, causing tooth decay**. *Also, keep an eye out for areas of brown or white spots which might be signs of early decay.*

### Brushing Motion

You will hear all kinds of advice on whether the best brushing motion is up and down, back and forth, or around in circles. The truth is that the direction really does not matter. **What is important is to clean each tooth thoroughly, top and bottom, inside and out.** This is where you will encounter resistance from your child, who probably will concentrate on only the front teeth that they can see. It may help to turn it into a game of "find the hidden teeth." Incidentally, a child cannot brush his teeth without help until they are older – about 6 to 8 years old. So be sure **to supervise or do the actual brushing if necessary**.

### What is the best toothbrush for kids age 9 to 13?

By the time your child reaches 9 to 10 years old, many adult teeth are now present, and an adult toothbrush/toothpaste can be used. Any soft-bristled toothbrush should be used two times a day for two minutes.



Beth Summers, MD, PhD  
Pediatric Hospitalist  
Hendricks Regional Health

### When should we begin using toothpaste and how much should we use?

The sooner the better! Starting at birth, clean your child's gums with a soft infant toothbrush or cloth and water. Parents should use a **tiny smear** of fluoride toothpaste to brush baby teeth twice daily as soon as they erupt and a soft, age-appropriate sized toothbrush. Once children are 3 to 6 years old, then the amount should be increased to a **pea-size dollop** and perform or assist your child's toothbrushing. Remember that young children do not have the ability to brush their teeth effectively. Children should spit out and not swallow excess toothpaste after brushing.

### Too Much Sugar

Besides regular toothbrushing with the right amount of fluoride toothpaste, your **child's diet** will play a key role in their dental health. And, of course, sugar is the big villain. The longer and more frequently their teeth are exposed to sugar, the greater the risk of cavities. **"Sticky sugar" foods such as sticky caramel, toffee, gum, and dried fruit—particularly when it stays in their mouth and bathes their teeth in sugar for hours—could do serious damage.** Make sure to always brush your child's teeth after a sugary food item. In addition, do not allow your child to have any sugar-containing liquid in a **sippy cup** for a prolonged period.

### Dental Checkups

During regular **well-child visits**, **the pediatrician** will check your child's teeth and gums to ensure their health. If your pediatrician notices problems, they may refer your child to a **pediatric dentist** or a general dentist with an interest in treating the dental needs of children.

**Both the American Academy of Pediatrics and the American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry recommend that all children see a pediatric dentist and establish a "dental home" by age of 1.**

### When should I take my child to the dentist for the first check-up?

***To prevent dental problems, your child should see a pediatric dentist when the first tooth appears, or no later than his/her first birthday.*** As part of their dental checkup the dentist will make sure all teeth are developing normally and that there are no dental problems and give you further advice on proper hygiene. The dentist also may apply a topical fluoride solution to provide extra protection against cavities. If you live in an area where the **water** is not fluoridated, they may prescribe fluoride drops or chewable tablets for your toddler. For more guidance on fluoride supplements, talk to your pediatrician.

### What is the difference between a pediatric dentist and a family dentist?

Pediatric dentists are the pediatricians of dentistry. A pediatric dentist has two to three years of specialty training following dental school and limits his/her practice to treating children only. Pediatric dentists are primary and specialty oral care providers for infants and children through adolescence, including those with special health needs. **How to find a pediatric dentist near your home at the following website:**

[www.mychildrensteeth.org](http://www.mychildrensteeth.org)

### How do dental sealants work?

Sealants work by filling in the crevasses on the chewing surfaces of the teeth. This shuts out food particles that could get caught in the teeth, causing cavities. The application is fast and comfortable and can effectively protect teeth for many years.

### Thumb sucking

Sucking is a natural reflex in infants and young children may **suck on thumbs**, fingers, pacifiers, and other objects. It may help them relax or make them feel safe or happy. Most children stop sucking by age 4. If your child continues to thumb suck after the permanent teeth have come in, it can cause problems with tooth alignment and your child's bite. The frequency, duration and intensity of a habit will determine whether dental problems may result. If you are worried about your child's sucking habits, talk to your dentist or **consult your child's pediatrician.**

## Malocclusion

Malocclusion, or **bad bite**, is a condition in which the teeth are crowded, crooked or out of alignment, or the jaws do not meet properly. This may become particularly noticeable between the ages of 6 and 12, when a child's permanent teeth are coming in. If not treated early, a bad bite can make it difficult to keep teeth and gums clean where teeth are crooked or crowded, increasing the risk for cavities and **gum disease**.

## Dental Emergencies

### What can I do to protect my child's teeth during sporting events?

Soft plastic mouthguards can be used to protect a child's teeth, lips, cheeks, and gums from sport related injuries. A custom-fitted mouthguard developed by a pediatric dentist will protect your child from injuries to the teeth, face and even provide protection from severe injuries to the head. Accidents can happen anywhere, anytime. Knowing how to handle a **dental emergency** can mean the difference between saving and losing your child's permanent tooth. For all dental emergencies, it is important to take your child to the dentist or an emergency room as soon as possible.

### What should I do if my child falls and knocks out a permanent tooth?

The most important thing to do is to remain calm. Then find the tooth. Hold it by the crown rather than the root and try to reinsert it in the socket. If that is not possible, put the tooth in a glass of milk and take your child and the glass immediately to the pediatric dentist.

### What should I do if my child has a toothache?

First, rinse the irritated area with warm salt water and place a cold compress on the face if it is swollen. Give the child acetaminophen (e.g., Children's Tylenol) for any pain. **DO NOT** place aspirin on the teeth or gums. Finally, see a dentist as soon as possible.

## Additional Resources:

[www.mychildrensteeth.org](http://www.mychildrensteeth.org)

[www.healthychildren.org](http://www.healthychildren.org)

[www.aapd.org](http://www.aapd.org)

*Should a situation arise in which your child needs to be admitted to a hospital, remember Hendricks Regional Health is home to Hendricks County's only designated pediatric unit, specially designed to treat children. Our experienced staff is available 24/7 to care for all ages from birth to 18 years.*