

# CHILDREN AND DENTAL HEALTH

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## Prenatal Health

For a dentally healthy infant , the same health considerations should be given for good general health. Current feeling is the infant does not benefit from or is harmed by fluoride taken by the mother.

Hormones can affect the pregnant woman's gums and her susceptibility to dental decay. The best defence against these problems is good personal home care and regular professional care.

The old wives' tale that calcium is taken from the mother's teeth has been proven to be totally false.

Women who get pregnancy gingivitis (a swelling and thickening of the gum tissue in an area of the mouth) usually have not had good home care either due to a lack of care or poor technique. Usually the condition reverses after childbirth. In some instances, the gum tissue needs to be surgically trimmed.

# Fluoride

Primary and permanent teeth are forming very early in infancy. Therefore to get the benefit from fluoride, it must be started early in life. Primary teeth are important not only to allow the child to be able to eat properly and not have painful toothaches, but they save the space for the permanent teeth to follow. Stronger permanent teeth can allow a person to have a good chance of having no dental decay in their lifetime.

Since there is no fluoride in Vancouver, Coast & Mountains's water, children should be given a supplement starting in infancy. The best way to give this to them is in the liquid form called Fluordrops. It gives the proper dosage for each age level. It has no real taste other than a slight saltiness so it can be put in a small amount of water and easily fed to the baby.

When the child is old enough to swish the water containing the fluoride, a topical benefit for the existing teeth is achieved as well as the systemic benefits.

Fluoride in great quantities is poisonous and therefore a bottle of fluoride solution should be kept out of the reach of children. If too large a dosage of fluoride is given it can discolour the teeth either white spots or in excessive overdoses, brown. This can be caused by giving too many drops in the water, doubling the dosage because a day was missed, or the child eating toothpaste with fluoride and getting additional fluoride. There are simple steps to prevent these overdoses.

1. When counting the drops if you for any reason are unsure of the count throw it out and start again - Fluordrops is very inexpensive and not worth guessing whether you were correct (if you allow your child to count with you and also see that you start again when you make a mistake a lesson in the importance of proper dosage for supplements and medication is learned)
2. If one day is missed, do not give a double dosage the next day. You can't make up for the missing day and twice as much is never better.
3. If your child eats the toothpaste or you aren't sure, get toothpaste without fluoride in it until the child is old enough to understand the reasons not to eat it.

If the above rules are followed, the dosage on the supplement are adhered to, and a child receives fluoride until they are twelve years old, all the benefit from fluoride should be able to be had safely and effectively.

## Diet

The diet concerns for good dental health are the same as for good general health, but there is some specific information that can insure good teeth.

In infancy, it is important that a baby does not go to sleep with a bottle of milk or juice or sweetened water. Bathing the teeth all night in any type of sugar natural or added will cause dental decay. In addition to this serious effect, the child is learning to associate sweets with comfort.

As the child grows and you are teaching them the how to make healthy choices in foods, teach them the difference between foods that may be healthy for their body, but not healthy for their teeth. Foods such as dried fruits are healthy to eat, but due to their concentrated sugars and their stickiness they are the same as candy to the teeth. Juices especially apple juice is very sweet, and in regards to teeth should be treated like pop. These foods are best given at meal times because the extra saliva flow helps them get washed away and the child can brush afterwards. It's best to skip these when packing lunch.

When out or in need of providing snacks, fresh fruit, pretzels, potato chips, or nuts are better choices. Cheese is also a good snack, besides the benefit from the calcium it has properties that retard decay. Gum should always be sugarless and the ones like Trident and Extra that have zylitol have the added benefit of retarding cavities. Hours of gum chewing is not a good idea, otherwise there is no harm in it.

## Home Care

The first education a child gets about caring for their teeth comes from what is taught to them at home. A child needs to learn from the time of their first tooth the NECESSITY of cleaning their teeth at least twice a day and after sweet foods. They need to learn that cleaning means both BRUSHING and FLOSSING. The teeth are not cleaned by brushing and the gums made healthy by flossing; they are both necessary to clean the teeth and they are both necessary to have healthy gums.

It takes twenty-four hours for the bacteria that cause dental problems to get organized and therefore most professionals feel brushing should be done twice a day and flossing once a day (It is easier to miss an area with the toothbrush and the massage from brushing is beneficial so an extra time is a good idea) If a child has had a sweet snack an extra time is not a bad idea.

With the first tooth, the brushing should begin. There are a variety of baby brushes - one of the easiest to use fits over the finger and is easily inserted in the mouth. Early brushing sets up life long habits of regular home care. As soon as more teeth emerge flossing should be added. If the infant or toddler is at an uncooperative age and little is achieved, the child is still learning the habit of regular daily care. During these periods a battle is not a positive lesson and a poor job of brushing and flossing is preferable. The importance of the learning the daily ritual is most important and should be continued, but with less concern for perfection. Usually these periods don't last long.

When eating out, most people find brushing to difficult or embarrassing; a small benefit can be had by swishing with water, eating a raw piece if fruit. If sweets were eaten additionally a piece of cheese or chewing gum that has zylitol is beneficial.

When a child is ready to brush and floss themselves, they are usually not proficient in their ability to be thorough. Therefore the parent needs to oversee the home care and at least once a day should do the procedures on the pretence of getting the places a new learner missed. Generally a child is capable of good brushing skills by five or six and flossing at eight.

## Technique

It is always best to learn good home care technique by being shown. There are some basics that can be helpful. A child has many sources of information; some of them are very poor. Television commercials are seen many times a day and the ones advertising toothpaste and toothbrushes often show poor technique. When watching these commercials with your child comment on the poor techniques being used.

## Brushing

There are three basic rules to teach the child from the earliest age:

1. Teeth should be apart to be brushed.
2. The inside, outside, and the tops of the teeth should all be brushed.
3. You can only brush two teeth at a time.

As you are brushing you can tell the method as you do it. You would say “Side of the brush against the gums and sweep in the direction they grow - one, two, three, four, five. Next two, side of the brush etc...” Start in the back of one side of the mouth and work around to the other side, then to the inside and work your way back. When you do the chewing surface (either first or last) brush back and forth counting five times.

## Flossing

When flossing, as you did with brushing, say what you are doing as you do it. “Seesaw to get between the teeth; now it’s wiggling freely so I will go up to where they meet and now with my fingers real close to the tooth I will hug the tooth and let it slide down until I feel it gently stop; now up and down until it squeaks; back up to where they meet and I’ll hug the other tooth and repeat until it squeaks.”

Use your own words when explaining and say it as often as is appropriate for your child and their age level.

## Professional Visits

A child's first visit should take place at between two or three years of age. When the child is past the "NO" stage. Usually the teeth are healthy and only preventative procedures are needed.

The dental office can be very frightening to someone, especially a small child, if they haven't seen it before. The strange smells, the strange furniture, and the strange equipment .

To make it less traumatic for a child have them come to the office with you for a portion of your visit - especially as the child is close in age to the first visit. What is very helpful is if someone in the office will arrange a time with you at the end of the day to introduce the child to the equipment. The child is given a ride in the chair, they are put in the "astronaut position", the light is shone on their hand and then on their teeth, the air squirter tickles their neck and possibly their fingernails are polished with the polishing cup. Then they can be given a new toothbrush, their own floss, and a prize from the special prize basket and they leave. They should not have any real procedure done at this visit, even if they are happy and cooperative. This should just be an introduction and something they can talk about at home.

On their actual first visit, they sometimes receive x-rays to check for decay between the back teeth and for any abnormalities. The teeth are visually checked for decay. Then the teeth are polished and topical fluoride is applied. Whether all these procedures are done on the first visit, should depend on the child's readiness. The parent does not need to prepare the child for the visit , other than to say they are now old enough to have their first visit. If asked what will be done give short descriptions and explain that they will be told what is going to be done before each thing is done. Do not say "It will not hurt" The child will only hear the word "hurt" The first visit, as the ones in the future, should be happy visits if handled well by the parents and the professionals.