

ord of mouth®

The Massachusetts Dental Society (MDS) is pleased to make this publication available to our member dentists as a way of communicating important oral health information to their patients.

Information in WORD OF MOUTH comes from dental health care professionals of the MDS and other leading professional dental organizations, including the American Dental Association. If you have any questions about specific content that may affect your oral health, please contact your dentist. For timely news regarding oral health, visit the "For the Public" section of the MDS Web site at www.massdental.org.

Your comments and suggestions regarding WORD OF MOUTH are always welcome. All correspondence and requests for additional copies may be forwarded to Melissa Carman, Managing Editor of Publications and Web Site, Massachusetts Dental Society, Two Willow Street, Suite 200, Southborough, MA 01745-1027, or email mcarman@massdental.org.

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Big Lessons for Little Mouths

As a parent, you know that schools require your child to have a complete physical examination by a pediatrician or family physician and several immunizations before the first day of school. These routine physical exams help to make sure that students are in good health before the school year starts. However, these exams, which include vision and hearing tests, overlook an important part of a child's health—his or her oral health. That's why it's important that parents schedule a dental exam as part of the back-to-school routine for all students. It's also important to not overlook the little ones: preschoolers. Preschool may be more about the ABCs than the MCAS, but preschoolers are just the right age to adopt a healthy curriculum of oral health care habits.

Dental health problems can begin at a very early age. That's why the Massachusetts Dental Society (MDS) recommends establishing a positive relationship between your preschooler and his or her dentist by starting dental visits early and continuing checkups regularly.

The statistics speak for themselves. By the time children are 3 or 4 years old, they have 20 primary (baby) teeth. That's 20 potential cavities. It may surprise you to learn that cavities are the most prevalent infectious disease among U.S. children, according to the American Dental Association (ADA), and that more than 51 million hours of school are lost each year due to dental-related problems. These problems can cause a child to have difficulty speaking, eating, sleeping, and concentrating, all of which can affect his or her ability to learn. Scarier still, recent studies indicate that tooth decay in primary teeth has increased among 2- to 5-year-olds.

And the little ones can't always speak for themselves. That's why it's especially important to make these dental visits a part of the health care routine, because a dentist may be able to identify oral health problems that you or your preschooler can't.

According to an article in General Dentistry, a journal from the Academy of General Dentistry (AGD), research shows that children who develop cavities in their baby teeth are more likely to develop cavities as adults. Moreover, according to the ADA, preventive care such as cleanings, fluoride treatments, and dental sealants provide children with "smile" insurance. Routine dental exams uncover problems that can be easily treated in the early stages, when damage is minimal. Another positive outcome of these "pre-preschool" dental visits is that your little one realizes at an early age that taking good care of his or her teeth is an important lesson.



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children see a dentist within six months of their first tooth eruption or by their first birthday.

You'll want to make sure, however, that you make this dental visit as "painless" as possible for your preschooler. Both the ADA and the MDS recommend that children see a dentist within six months of their first tooth eruption or by their first birthday. (If your child does not have a dentist, visit the MDS Web site at **www.massdental.org** and use the Find an MDS Dentist service.) Just as with doctors' offices, the dental office can be a scary place to a young child when he or she is unfamiliar with what to expect. So you will want to look for a dental practice that takes young children's special needs into account. Much like a pediatrician is a doctor for children, a pedodontist (or pediatric dentist) is a dentist for children. However, many general dentists treat children as well as adults.

Making the Dental Visit Fun

A fun environment can help preschoolers become excited about going to the dentist, and nowadays many dentists incorporate kidfriendly design into their office environment. Some offices even go so far as to offer entertainment, such as books, video games, and DVDs, all of which help to make the visit a little more like playtime.

The best way to put your preschooler at ease is to prepare him or her as to what to expect. Not everyone likes surprises, so you should explain what the dentist does. Let your child know that the dentist will examine his or her mouth, teeth, and gums, and may even take pictures (X-rays) of your child's mouth. X-rays are taken to see how the teeth are developing and if there is any hidden decay not visible to the eye. The dentist may recommend preventive treatment for your preschooler's teeth, including fluoride treatments or dental sealants, which is a plastic material applied to the chewing surfaces of the back teeth. Dental sealants act as a barrier for protecting teeth from plaque, and they usually last several years before a reapplication is necessary.

Adopting Healthy Habits

In addition to making sure your preschooler visits the dentist, you'll also want to teach him or her proper oral health habits. This includes making sure that your child brushes his or her teeth twice a day with a fluoride toothpaste and flosses once a day to remove plague from the areas brushing can't reach. The ADA recommends that an adult brush a child's teeth until the child is at least 6 years old. By age 6 or 7, children should be able to brush their own teeth, but you still may want to supervise the process to ensure that your child is brushing correctly and for the right amount of time—two minutes is the recommended minimum length of time to get the maximum benefits from brushing. Flossing is even trickier, since it can be difficult for little hands to maneuver dental floss between teeth, so you will want to floss your preschooler's teeth for him or her every day. Make brushing and flossing part of the bedtime—and lifetime—routine.

You will also want to watch what you are giving your preschooler to snack on. A well-balanced diet with plenty of fruits and vegetables and dairy products, like milk and yogurt, will help build strong teeth. You should try to avoid processed snack foods, such as fruit snacks, juice boxes, candy, and soda. They may be easy to pack in a lunchbox, but they can be loaded with sugar, which we all know causes cavities. So swap the gummy fruit snacks for a piece of real fruit, and trade out the juice box or sports drink for milk or fluoridated water.

These are all good habits for preschoolers—and people of all ages—to adopt, and when combined with regular dental visits starting at an early age, proper oral hygiene and a balanced diet can help ensure the health of your preschooler's teeth.

For more information on your child's oral health, contact the Massachusetts Dental Society at (800) 342-8747 or visit www.massdental.org.