



## Baby Talk

**A**s a rule, babies are pretty needy creatures. They can't walk, they can't talk, and they can't dress, clean, or feed themselves. So, as a parent, you take on the responsibility of ensuring that your infant's needs are met. You make sure she gets the proper nutrition necessary to grow. You take him to the doctor's office for checkups. And just because he or she may not have a full set of teeth yet doesn't mean that your baby's oral health should be overlooked. The Massachusetts Dental Society (MDS) wants to remind you to consider your baby's oral health needs, too, because taking care of your infant's teeth is not just "baby talk."

Generally, a baby's four front teeth begin to appear between the ages of six months to one year. The remainder of primary, or baby, teeth will erupt usually in pairs on each side of the jaw, until the child is approximately 3 years old. Most children have a full set of primary teeth by age 3 and will keep those teeth until

age 5 or 6, when they begin to loosen and fall out, according to the Academy of General Dentistry (AGD).

While your infant's mouth may be toothless, you still need to make sure he or she gets the proper oral care. Begin oral health care as soon as you bring your baby home from the hospital by cleaning his or her gums with a clean gauze pad or washcloth after each feeding. The MDS recommends that as soon as the first tooth appears, parents begin brushing baby teeth with a soft-bristled toothbrush and a small amount of water. Unless your child's dentist advises it, do not begin using a fluoridated toothpaste until the age of 2, and then use only a pea-sized amount. Children should be taught to spit out toothpaste and rinse with water after brushing. Flossing should begin as soon as any two teeth touch. Parents should assist their children until they are old enough to brush and floss on their own—usually by age 6 or 7.

As your child's baby teeth begin to erupt, he or she will most likely experience painful gums and oral discomfort—"teething." Signs that teething is causing your infant discomfort include crankiness, appetite loss,

excessive drooling, pink or red cheeks, coughing, or increased chewing or

sucking of fingers and/or toys, says the AGD. When your child experiences discomfort from teething, there are some things you can do to help alleviate the pain. Giving your baby a cold, wet cloth to suck on can soothe painful gums. Many stores carry teething accessories or toys that are designed specifically to help relieve the pressure that comes from teething, such as water-filled plastic devices that can be frozen.

Primary teeth are just as important as adult, or secondary, teeth because they help children with biting, chewing, and speaking, and even help give the face its shape and form, says the American Dental Association. Early tooth loss from dental decay can have a serious impact on your child's self-esteem and self-confidence.

Teach your child from an early age the importance of eating a healthy diet, along with practicing routine oral hygiene, to maintain healthy teeth and gums for a lifetime of smiles. **o**



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