

Is Your Baby Hitting the Bottle Too Much?



As a parent, you try to do everything you can to make sure your baby is healthy and happy, from keeping his or her diaper dry to buying organic baby food. But you may be unaware of one seemingly innocuous practice that could seriously endanger your child's dental health. Overexposure to sweetened liquids, through a baby bottle, is a risk factor for early childhood caries, known commonly as "baby bottle tooth decay." Even the most informed parent may not be aware that one of the healthiest liquids found in baby bottles—milk—can cause tooth decay. Are you letting your baby hit the bottle too much?

Baby bottle tooth decay develops when sugary liquids are given and are left clinging to an infant's teeth for long periods, according to the American Dental Association (ADA). Many beverages commonly given to babies—including milk, baby formula, and fruit juice—contain sugar. Bacteria in the mouth feed off of this sugar and produce acids that attack the teeth, leading to decay.

But it's not just what you put in your child's bottle that causes baby bottle tooth decay, it's also how often and for how long his or her teeth are exposed to decay-causing acids. Every time your child drinks a sweetened beverage, the acids attack the teeth for 20 minutes or more, says the ADA. After prolonged exposure, the teeth can decay. Parents or caregivers who repeatedly offer their baby a bottle containing sugary liquids, either as a pacifier or at bedtime, can do serious harm to their child's oral health. Letting a child fall asleep while sucking on a bottle is especially harmful, as the sugary liquid can have hours to make contact with bacteria in the mouth.

What's more, many people don't realize that a baby's teeth can start to decay soon after they first appear in the mouth, and by the time the decay is noticed, it may be too late to save the teeth. But you can help prevent this from happening to your child by following these tips from the ADA:

- After each feeding, wipe the baby's gums with a clean gauze pad. Begin brushing your child's teeth with a soft, child-sized toothbrush when the first tooth erupts, and clean and massage gums in areas that remain toothless. Begin flossing when all the baby teeth have erupted, usually by age 2 or 2½.
- Never allow your child to fall asleep with a bottle containing milk, formula, fruit juice, or sweetened liquids. If you must put your baby down with a bottle, fill it with fluoridated water only. Fluoride is a substance found in nature that helps prevent tooth decay.
- Avoid filling your child's bottle with liquids such as sugary juices and soft drinks.
- If your child needs to be comforted between regular feedings, at night, or during naps, give him or her a clean pacifier recommended by your dentist or physician, and never dip the pacifier in any sweetened liquid, such as honey.
- If your local water supply does not contain fluoride, ask your dentist how your child should get it. He or she may recommend fluoride treatments.
- Start dental visits by the child's first birthday, and make sure to schedule twice-a-year checkups for your child. And if you think your child has dental problems, take the child to the dentist as soon as possible.

Children who experience caries as infants or toddlers have a much greater probability of developing subsequent caries in both primary and permanent teeth, according to the American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry. That is all the more reason to keep a lid on your baby's bottle consumption.