



FIVE TIPS

to Improve Your Child's Oral Health

Attitudes and habits established at an early age are critical to maintaining good oral health throughout life. Dental decay is the single-most-common chronic childhood disease in the United States. But with good nutrition, proper care, and regular dental visits, children can maintain healthy mouths—and healthy smiles. To help promote the benefits of establishing good oral health habits at an early age, the Massachusetts Dental Society (MDS) offers parents and caregivers these five tips:

- 1.** Oral health care should start from day one. It is essential to begin oral health care as soon as your baby is born. Clean his or her gums gently with a clean gauze pad or washcloth after each feeding. Parents should brush their baby's teeth gently with a soft-bristled toothbrush and a small amount of water as soon as the first tooth appears, typically between six months and one year.
- 2.** Children's teeth should be brushed for two minutes, at least twice a day. While it's okay to let your child "take a turn," parents or caregivers should do the actual brushing until the child's manual dexterity is good enough to do an effective job in removing all plaque on the teeth. Use a fluoridated toothpaste and a soft-bristled toothbrush (but don't use fluoride toothpaste on a child until he or she can spit). There are toothbrushing apps available for your smartphone or tablet that can help keep kids motivated about brushing and ensure they brush for a full two minutes. Flossing also is necessary to remove food particles and plaque that build up between teeth, and it should occur as soon as the teeth are close together and any two are touching, which usually occurs by age four. Using a smooth-coated, mint-flavored floss will appeal more to young mouths.
- 3.** Certain foods and drinks can affect children's teeth more than others. Sticky candy and snacks like gummy worms, licorice, fruit snacks, and even raisins have a high sugar content and are the worst offenders when it comes to causing tooth decay, otherwise known as cavities. Excessive consumption of soda, juice, and sweetened sports drinks can also cause decay. Instead, children should drink water or milk. Drinking fluoridated water from the tap is especially helpful for preventing cavities because fluoride makes the outer surface of teeth more resistant to the acid attacks that cause tooth decay. Studies show that children who drink fluoridated water as their teeth grow will have stronger, more decay-resistant teeth over their lifetime.
- 4.** Be mindful of the oral implications of pacifier use and thumb sucking. These are common habits and a normal, soothing reflex for babies and toddlers. Most children will stop sucking their thumb between the ages of two and four, and typically no harm is done to their teeth or jaws. However, some children who repeatedly suck on a finger or a pacifier for long periods of time may push their upper front teeth toward their lip or cause their front teeth to not come in properly. To encourage kids to stop, try positive measures, such as praising them or rewarding them with small, non-food goodies like stickers. Negative reinforcement or constant nagging by parents can have the opposite effect.
- 5.** Regular dental visits will help avoid potential problems. Dental visits are very important to ensure that children's teeth are coming in properly and do not show signs of decay. Children should visit the dentist for an examination and cleaning every six months to avoid potential problems. The American Dental Association, the Academy of Pediatric Dentistry, and the American Academy of Pediatrics all recommend that a child's first visit to the dentist should be six months after the eruption of the first tooth or by the age of one.

Visit massdental.org/baby-oral-health to download *The Mouths of Babes* brochure and visit the MDS YouTube channel (youtube.com/massdentalsociety) to view short, educational videos on first dental visits and children's brushing and flossing.