Oral health: an essential part of care in early childhood

Tooth decay is the most common chronic illness in children and can have a profound impact on a child’s health and quality of life. As a GP you are well-placed to provide advice and identify problems early as part of your care to children.

Tooth decay has a significant impact on a child’s health and wellbeing. Like other bacterial infections, tooth decay can worsen if left untreated. Children can be affected by:

- pain and discomfort
- difficulty sleeping
- difficulties chewing; affecting growth and development
- poor self-esteem and social isolation
- speech development problems
- higher risk of new decay in other baby teeth
- damage to developing permanent teeth

As a GP you can make a difference

Evidence shows that up to eleven visits are made to the GP in the first year of a child’s life¹. This places you in a unique position to monitor the health of baby teeth and provide family guidance around the importance of caring for baby teeth.

What you can do:

1. **Look at gums and teeth**

   Complete an opportunistic ‘lift the lip’ oral health assessment of children attending for other reasons for early identification and intervention. Whenever you do an ear, nose and throat assessment, assess a child’s teeth and gums

   In a healthy mouth, teeth are not discoloured and the gums are pink, indicating a healthy blood supply.

2. **Identify signs of decay**

   Look for these signs:

   - **First stage of caries**
     
     Upper incisors develop a dull, white band (demineralisation) along the gum line. This stage is reversible, if treated.

   - **Signs of early decay**
     
     Brown spots or discolouration on the teeth from loss of minerals from tooth enamel
     Redness and swelling of the gums.

   - **Advanced stages of caries**
     
     Blackened areas
     Very red and inflamed gums.
     Brownish black stumps indicate advanced decay.

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**quick facts**

11% of children under 3 years have experienced dental caries². 47% of school entry aged children have decay³. Dental caries is the third most common reason for preventable hospital admissions in children under 5 years⁴. 43% of children aged between two and eight years of age brush their teeth less than twice a day⁵. Children at risk of being overweight can have higher caries experience than their normal weight peers⁶. 71% of children aged between one and five years have never had a dental visit⁷.
Refer child and family to an oral health professional
If you see signs of decay, refer the family to a local public or private dental service.

- All children aged 0-12 years can access public dental services. It is free if parents have a health care card or pensioner concession card and low cost for others.
- Find the nearest public dental service at www.dhsv.org.au, or call (03) 9341 1000 or 1800 833 039 (outside Melbourne metropolitan area).
- Families who receive Family Tax Benefit A or other Government payment are eligible for up to $1000 of basic dental treatment for their children 2-17 years under the Child Dental Benefits Schedule. For more information visit www.dhs.gov.au
- To locate a private dentist visit www.yellowpages.com.au or the ‘find a dentist’ search function on the Australian Dental Association website www.ada.org.au or call (03) 8825 4600.

Offer advice
Your advice may influence the decisions a family makes that affect oral health.

0 to 12 months
- Do not put a baby to sleep with a bottle. Pooling of milk (containing lactose) around the teeth overnight can lead to decay.
- Start cleaning teeth as soon as they appear. Use small soft toothbrush with water (no toothpaste).
- From 6 months, introduce drinking from a cup.

12 to 18 months
- Brush child’s teeth with water twice a day (no toothpaste)
- After 12 months children should be drinking from a cup.

18 months to 5 years
- At 18 months start using a pea sized smear of low fluoride toothpaste,
- Assist child brush their teeth twice a day until they are eight years old.
- Water and milk are the best drinks. (Low fat milk can be given to children 2 years and over.)
- By 2 years of age a child should have an oral health check, this can be done by the maternal and child health nurse, family GP or dentist.

For all children
- Fruit juice and fruit drinks are not recommended for infants under 12 months.
- Give fresh fruit instead of fruit juice. Chewing stimulates saliva which protects teeth against decay.
- Water and milk are the best drinks. (Full cream milk for children under 2 years of age; Low fat milk can be given to children 2 years and over)
- Limit sugary drinks including: soft drinks, fruit juice, sports drinks, vitamin waters, cordials, fruit drinks and energy drinks between meals.
- Limit processed foods and foods high in sugar to reduce the risk of tooth decay and obesity.

References