



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:

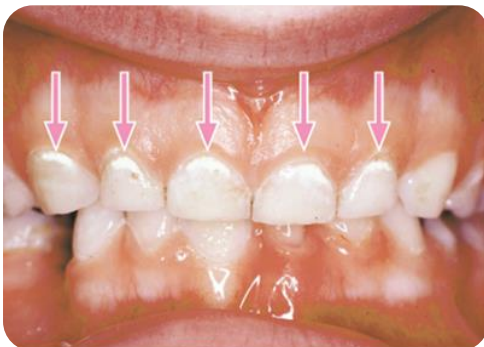
1 Look at gums and teeth

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 discoloration 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.

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.

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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.

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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

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3. Department of Human Services 2007 Victorian Child Health and Wellbeing Survey Technical Report, 2006. Statewide Outcomes for Children Branch, Office for Children, Department of Human Services, Victorian Government, Melbourne.
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7. Department of Human Services 2007 Victorian Child Health and Wellbeing Survey Technical Report, 2006. Statewide Outcomes for Children Branch, Office for Children, Department of Human Services, Victorian Government, Melbourne.