

PROTECTING YOUR BABY FROM TOOTH DECAY

Your baby is too young for tooth decay, right? Wrong. While most 1-year-olds have healthy teeth, 5% or so develop a form of rampant tooth decay called "nursing caries" or "baby bottle mouth" soon after their upper teeth start to erupt. The bacteria that cause this decay flourish when a baby's teeth are in prolonged contact with formula, breast milk, cow's milk, fruit juice, or other sweet drinks.

Nursing caries usually occurs in babies who go to bed with a bottle, but it can also occur in babies who breastfeed intermittently during the night or drink from a bottle off and on throughout the day. This kind of tooth decay affects mainly the upper teeth, probably because the baby's tongue covers the lower teeth during nursing. Decay starts at the gum line in the front teeth and, if not promptly arrested, spreads to include other teeth as they come in. Once started, nursing caries can progress so rapidly that the affected teeth are totally destroyed in a matter of months. The consequences for the baby's appearance, nutrition, and speech development can be severe.

To protect your baby from this distressing condition, follow these guidelines for oral health:

- Make sure your baby gets adequate fluoride, from supplements or fluoridated water.
- Clean your baby's teeth at least once a day. Use a wash cloth or soft brush, without toothpaste.
- Cut down on the chances of passing on the bacteria that cause tooth decay to your baby. Brush and floss your own teeth regularly, get your dental problems treated promptly, and don't share eating utensils with your baby.
- As soon as your baby's teeth start to come in, offer breast or bottle only at three- or four-hour intervals during the day, at mealtimes. If your baby sleeps in your bed, don't allow at-will breastfeeding during the night. If your baby is bottle fed, don't prop the bottle or allow the baby to take it with him when he gets down from a meal.
- Don't allow your baby to "graze" throughout the day or to use the bottle as a toy or a daytime companion. Substituting a pacifier is OK, but don't put honey or other sweeteners on the nipple.
- Don't put your baby to bed with a bottle at night or at naptime. Try rocking, or offer a security blanket or favorite toy instead. If your baby has gotten used to a bottle in bed and refuses to sleep without it, try filling the bottle with water (which is harmless to the teeth). You may have to make the change gradually, with increasing dilution of the formula.
- Take your baby for a first dental visit by 12 to 18



months of age. We can help you find a dentist who has experience with babies and suggest sources of care if you do not have dental insurance.

- Wean your baby from breast or bottle to a cup by 12 to 18 months of age.

These suggestions will make weaning easier:

- Offer fruit juice only from a cup, starting at 4 to 6 months of age. Cup-feeding cuts down on the time juice is in contact with teeth, and early familiarity with the cup makes weaning easier when baby is a little older.
 - Offer formula or breast milk in a cup by 6 months of age. Start feeding solids at 4 months if your baby is bottle-fed, 6 months if breast-fed, and start finger foods at 9 months.
 - Take advantage of diminished interest in nursing that may be associated with crawling (7 or 8 months of age) or walking (11 to 12 months) to start weaning. Your child is ready if he or she rejects the bottle, chews on the nipple instead of sucking, or would rather play than nurse after the first few minutes.
 - If your baby resists weaning, offer the cup *before* nursing and reduce the number of nursings gradually (eliminating one bottle-feeding or breastfeeding every three to four days). Respond to your child's needs with extra holding.
- Please call during regular office hours if:
- Your baby's temperament or sleeping patterns make these recommendations difficult to follow.
 - Your baby is still resisting weaning at 18 months of age.
 - You need help in managing sleep or eating behavior.
 - You think you see signs of decay in your baby's teeth.
 - You have any questions about your baby's oral health.