

open wide

Dental care starts with that first tooth

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Admit it, the best part about going to the dentist with your child is the very end—when she gets a new toothbrush and you both get to go home. But regular dental visits and proper oral hygiene are essential to ensuring optimal oral health for your little one.

February is National Children's Dental Health Awareness Month, a good time to brush up on your own family's dental needs. Here's something you probably didn't know: The U.S. Surgeon General reports that tooth decay is the single most common chronic childhood disease—five times more common than asthma and seven times more common than hay fever. Yikes.

Establishing proper habits early on can help your child beat those odds. "The importance of good oral hygiene is paramount to reducing the likelihood of cavities and other issues. Implementing good practices at an early age will hopefully carry on with the child as they mature into adulthood," says Pediatric Dentist Dr. Jason Parker.

never too soon. really.

Starting early means as soon as the first tooth emerges. Infant teeth can be cleansed after feedings and before bedtime by gently wiping them with a washcloth. Once your child is comfortable, you can move on to a baby toothbrush with a small amount of fluoridated toothpaste. Whatever you do, refrain from sending your baby, and his burgeoning smile, to bed with a bottle.

"Parents often do this to comfort the child to sleep. However, the sugar containing substance in the bottle wreaks havoc on the developing dentition," says Dr. Parker. "If you must send your child to bed with a bottle, put warm water in it instead of juice or milk."

Prevention also means regular dental visits. And while it may be like 'pulling teeth,' to get your little one to say 'AHHH,' these visits are crucial to a clean bill of oral health.

Maria Wisdom, Uptown, has no problems when it comes to bringing her eight-year-old son John to his appointments. But her daughter Helen, six, is a different story.

"She just doesn't want them in her mouth at all. She becomes hysterical," Maria says. "I've learned the best thing to do is make sure I schedule her appointments at the right time of day,

when she's well-rested and feeling good."

The earlier your child becomes accustomed to visiting the dentist, the less daunting it will be. According to The American Academy of Pediatrics and The American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry, the first visit to the dentist should occur sometime before the age of one, or shortly after the first tooth erupts. In addition to any detection of tooth decay, an early visit to the dentist can be just as beneficial for the parent to learn the specifics of pediatric oral care. The fundamentals are pretty straight-forward—daily brushing and flossing, eating a nutritious, low-sugar diet, drinking fluoridated water and visiting a dentist every six months.

day in, day out...

While these measures represent a good framework to build upon, they must be carried out on a daily basis. And we all know, maintaining any type of regimen with a young one can be a challenge for parents. An even bigger hurdle is the fact that many squirming toddlers are unwilling to 'open wide' and stand still for a solid three-minute tooth brushing.

When Metairie Mom Sarah Carey's son Ashley, now 14, was younger she used a reward system. "The only way I could get him to brush was by bribing him. I'd let him pick a sticker each time he finished. Once we got that system down, it was a lot easier on both of us," says Sarah. Her three-year-old daughter Adair, however, is easily up to the task. "Adair likes it. She chooses her Princess or Elmo toothbrush, and is ready to go."

Other tips to encourage your child to step up willingly to the sink: make up a fun game, story or song to go along with brushing. Dr. Parker also advises letting your children pick out their own toothbrush and paste.

"Allowing children to play a role in decisions of toothpaste, toothbrushes, and flossing aids enables them to begin to develop their own sense of direction with hygiene, and further instills a routine," says Dr. Parker.

Of course, once your toddler becomes an independent brusher, your supervision is still required in the fight against dental cavities. Dr. Parker recommends parents take an active role in brushing their child's teeth until the age of nine or 10, and still perform a 'final check' until they are 11 to insure they are brushing properly.

Brushing should last a full three minutes and toothbrushes should be replaced every three to four months, or as soon as bristles become frayed. And while it may be tempting for your child to use gobs of toothpaste on everything (including the bathroom



mirror), only a pea-sized amount is needed at each brushing. (Fluoride is also toxic when swallowed in excess, so always supervise children carefully.) Flossing can also be difficult for a young child without a parent's help, yet it is not something to skip. Children's flossing aids help make this necessary task less overwhelming.

darn (or bless!) those genes

Keep in mind that even the best, most well-intentioned plans don't guarantee a cavity-free child. Don't feel like you've failed if your little one ends up in need of a filling. Your child's dental destiny is somewhat predetermined by genetics. But nonetheless, a healthy oral regimen isn't just for the benefit of the Tooth Fairy. While your toddler's teeth will eventually fall out, Dr. Parker stresses the vital role primary teeth play in your child's development. Baby teeth serve as conduits for proper speech, pronunciation and the enjoyment of food. Baby teeth also serve as natural space holders for the



developing permanent tooth underneath, and are crucial in the development of the jaw. Most importantly, the health of your baby's teeth helps ensure he enjoys a beautiful smile—from his kindergarten yearbook picture up to his wedding photos and beyond. ❀

TEN TIPS FOR KEEPING YOUNG TEETH HEALTHY:

- 1.** Brush at least twice daily (after breakfast and before bedtime) for three minutes using a pea-sized amount of fluoridated toothpaste.
- 2.** Floss daily before bedtime. Use a children's flossing aid to help.
- 3.** Don't put your baby to bed with a bottle.
- 4.** Avoid giving toddlers juice throughout the day.
- 5.** Eat a well-balanced diet that limits starchy and sugary foods.
- 6.** Call the sewerage and water board to determine if your Parish's water is fluoridated; if not, talk to your pediatrician about fluoride supplements.
- 7.** Chew Xylitol-based gum instead of regular gum, for children old enough to chew gum.
- 8.** Wear mouth guards when playing contact sports to avoid injury to the primary teeth.
- 9.** Change toothbrushes every three-four months, especially during cold season to avoid the transmission of germs.
- 10.** Take your child to the dentist for regular check-ups by age one.