Caring for your child’s teeth and gums

In the U.S., tooth decay affects more children than any other long-term disease. If it is not treated, tooth decay can lead to problems with eating, speaking and learning.

Tooth decay in children can be avoided with:

- Good dental habits
- Good nutrition
- Regular dental visits

**Brush and floss the germs away.**

When your child’s teeth first appear, brush them with a soft toothbrush twice daily. When your child is preschool age, add a pea-sized dab of fluoride toothpaste. Fluoride strengthens teeth by hardening the tooth enamel. Young children might swallow toothpaste, so don’t use more. Eating fluoride can cause tooth stains.

Young children need help getting their teeth really clean. Parents should brush the child’s teeth until they are seven or eight years old.

When a child’s back teeth touch each other, it’s time to start flossing. Toothbrush bristles cannot reach between back teeth to remove food and plaque, so this is important. As with brushing, children need help with this until they are around seven to eight years old.

**Serve healthy meals and limit sugary snacks.**

Serve your child food from the five basic food groups:

- Fruits
- Vegetables
- Meats and proteins
- Dairy products
- Grains

**You should know:**

- Help your child brush twice a day with a dab of fluoride toothpaste.
- Give your child healthy food. Limit between-meal snacks.
- Take your child to the dentist regularly. Talk to your dentist about fluoride supplements.
- When your child’s first adult back teeth (molars) come in, ask about dental sealants.
After meals, kids should brush their teeth or rinse with water. To avoid tooth decay, limit sugary snacks and drinks. When your child eats sugar, their teeth are attacked by acids for 20 minutes or more. This can cause decay.

**Visit the dentist early.**

Take your child for a first dentist visit when teeth begin to appear, or by their first birthday. This gives the dentist a chance to look for early problems, and to give you advice about diet, bottles and daily mouth care.

Fluoride is a natural mineral that is often added to water to prevent tooth decay. If you have fluoride in your water, your child already receives fluoride. If you don’t, talk to your dentist about providing extra fluoride treatments.

Another way to prevent decay is sealants. Dental sealants are thin plastic coatings, which the dentist paints onto your child’s back teeth. This is where most decay begins. Getting sealants is fast, easy and painless. Sealants are usually covered as a preventive service with little or no cost to you.

Helping your child develop good oral habits will keep your child’s teeth and gums strong and healthy.