



Early Childhood Caries (Cavities)

Early childhood caries (tooth decay or cavities) develops when bacteria in the mouth breakdown sugars to produce acid. This acid attacks the tooth taking the mineral out of the tooth surface. The loss of mineral weakens the tooth resulting tooth decay. Dental caries is the most prevalent chronic disease of children in the United States that is largely preventable.

Early childhood caries is defined as the presence of one or more cavities, teeth missing because of cavities, or teeth with fillings because a cavity was present in a preschool-age child between birth and 71 months of age.

What causes early childhood tooth decay?

- When liquids or semisolids that contain sugar are left in a baby's or a young child's mouth for a prolonged time, the sugar breaks down into acid which can remove minerals from the teeth, causing cavities to form. Common high sugar food/drink sources are sugar-sweetened beverages, fruit-based and milk-based sweetened drinks, 100% fruit juices, pureed baby food pouches, cakes, cookies, sweetened cereals, sweet desserts, candy, honey, and syrups. Breast milk and formula also contain sugar.
- Baby bottle tooth decay (cavities) can occur when baby is put to bed with a bottle filled with a sugary liquid or if liquid puree is left on teeth. These cavities are usually in the front teeth.

How can you protect your child's teeth?

- Your child should not:
 - ✓ Be put to bed with a bottle filled with milk, formula, or sweet drink.
 - ✓ Sleep at night while continuing to nurse.
 - ✓ Drink from a bottle after age 1.
 - ✓ Use a pacifier covered in any sugared drinks or food.
- Your child should:
 - ✓ See a dentist when their first tooth erupts, but no later than age 1.
 - ✓ Start drinking from a regular cup at or around 9 months of age.
 - ✓ If your child must have a bottle to sleep, fill it with plain water.
 - ✓ Limit pureed pouch foods to mealtimes only.
 - ✓ Protect his/her teeth from dental caries by regularly accessing professional care, have a healthy diet of low sugar food, and drink beverages containing the mineral fluoride; and, when old enough, get dental sealants.

- ✓ Always clean your child's teeth before bedtime!

Why are baby teeth important?

- They are needed for chewing food and permanent tooth development.
- They provide a nice smile and promote a good self-image for children.
- They are needed to speak clearly.
- If they are lost too early, permanent teeth can come in crowded and out of alignment.

Resources

American Dental Association – Mouth Healthy, Statement on Early Childhood Caries

<https://www.ada.org/en/about-the-ada/ada-positions-policies-and-statements/statement-on-early-childhood-caries#:~:text=Early%20Childhood%20Caries%20is%20defined,and%2071%20months%20of%20age.>

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

<https://www.cdc.gov/oralhealth/basics/childrens-oral-health/index.html>

[NPR.org](https://www.npr.org)

<https://www.npr.org/sections/thesalt/2013/01/30/170667837/oh-baby-squeezable-snacks-might-be-tough-on-the-teeth>