

# ORAL HEALTH FOR INFANTS AND TODDLERS

Children's primary (baby) teeth are important for many reasons. Healthy teeth allow a toddler to:

- eat a nutritious diet
- learn to speak properly
- have a healthy smile
- keep the correct spaces for the permanent (adult) teeth to move into later on.

Early loss of a primary tooth can reduce the space for the permanent tooth, resulting in crowded permanent tooth.

## *Before the baby is born*

A baby's teeth start to form during pregnancy. By the time the baby is born, a full set of primary teeth has begun to form underneath the baby's gums. During the last three months of pregnancy, the mother provides the minerals needed to calcify the baby's teeth. These minerals do not come from the mother's teeth - and there is no truth to the saying a tooth is lost for every pregnancy. The best source of these minerals is from an increased intake of dairy foods (or other calcium-rich foods and drinks) by the mother. A nutritious diet and good dental hygiene during pregnancy will ensure that mother's and baby's teeth will be healthy and strong.

## *Teething*

Baby's first tooth usually comes through the gum between 6 to 9 months of age. A full set of 20 primary teeth should be present in the mouth by 3 years of age.

Some babies and toddlers may experience teething problems such as:

- red swollen gums
- changed eating patterns
- irritability and restlessness
- flushed cheeks or raised temperature
- dribbling
- finger and fist sucking

Mild teething problems might be eased by letting the baby chew on objects such as:

- a teething ring
- crusts of bread
- rusks

Rubbing your child's gum with your finger, or applying a small amount of teething gel may also help to ease teething pain. Teething should not cause severe illness. If the child has a fever or diarrhoea, see your doctor.

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*Toothbrushing should start as soon as the first tooth appears.*

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### ***Thumbsucking and dummies***

If the habit persists after the permanent teeth appear, it can push the front teeth and surrounding bone out of shape. This may then need correction by the dentist.

If you use a dummy:

- do not add flavouring.
- do not suck the child's dummy if it's dropped as this will transfer bacteria from your mouth to the child's. Always carry a spare.
- never allow children to share a dummy.

Suggestions for changing habits

- Only give the child a dummy at sleep time.
- Remove the dummy as soon as the child is asleep.
- Discourage your child from walking around with a dummy or thumb in his/her mouth.
- If the child still has a dummy or thumbsucking habit at around 4 years of age, make a date by which the child will have to give up the habit, for example, on the child's fourth birthday. Talk to the child about giving it up and work towards reducing the time the child has the dummy or sucks his/her thumb. By the fourth birthday, the child may be prepared to stop the habit.
- Discard the dummy as early as possible.
- If your child's sucking habit causes you concern, discuss methods of breaking the habit with your local dental professional.



Figure 1: Severe open bite caused by thumb sucking

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***The habit of dummy or thumbsucking should be discouraged and stopped before permanent teeth appear in the mouth***

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### ***Tooth decay in early childhood***

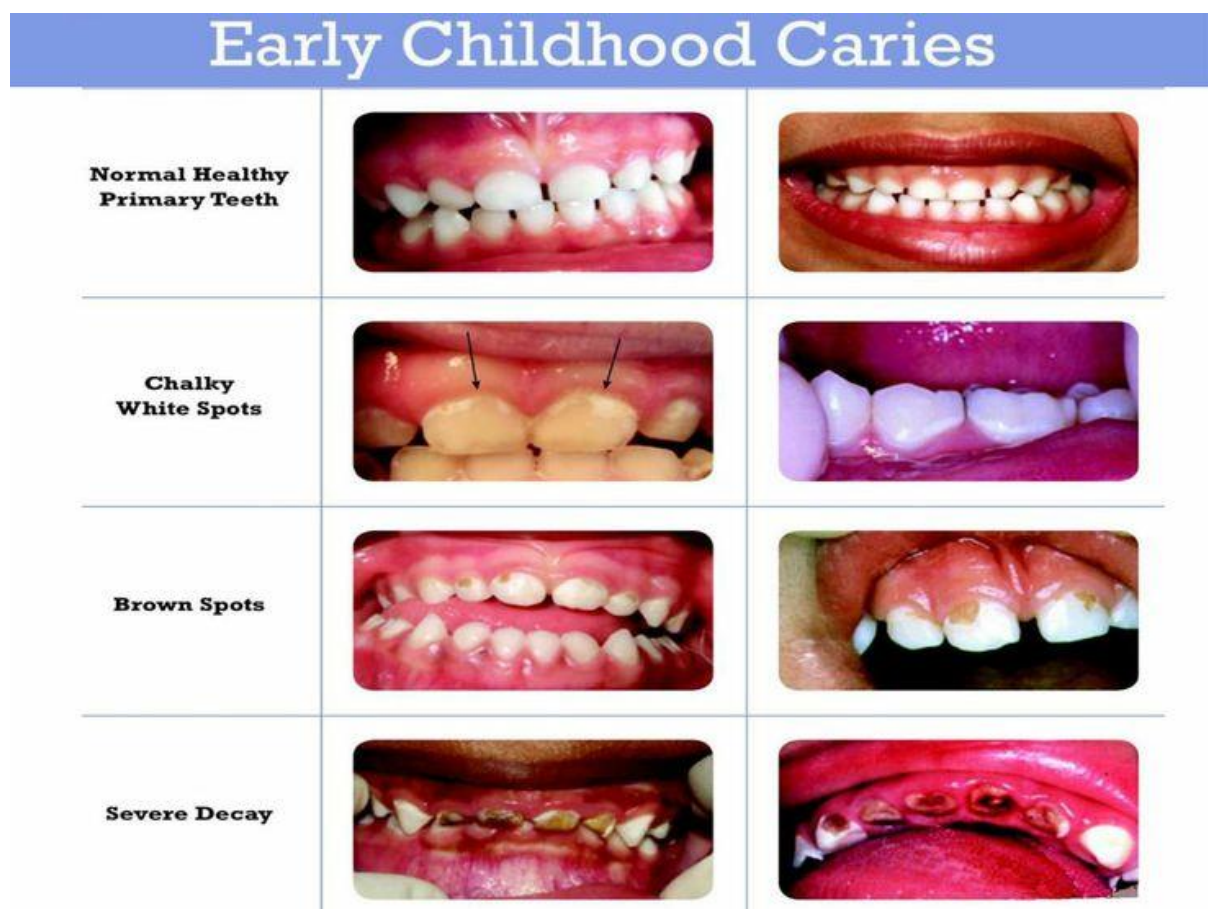
The primary teeth can decay from the time they appear in the mouth. In fact, teeth decay more readily as they first appear in the mouth. As teeth mature in the mouth, they become harder and can resist tooth decay better.

Decay is caused when bacteria use sugars from foods to produce acids. These acids attack teeth causing mineral loss.

The very early stages of mineral loss are **reversible** but continued acid attack leads to a cavity that requires a filling.

Babies are not born with decay-causing bacteria in their mouths. The bacteria are passed to babies by contact such as kissing and food tasting or by mothers cleaning the dummy in their own mouths. The transfer of these bacteria can be delayed if parents and caregivers have healthy, decay-free mouths. **So one of the best ways to give your child a head start to staying decay free is to ensure that your own teeth and gums are clean and healthy.**

Early Childhood Caries (ECC) is the name given to a pattern of tooth decay that can develop in infants and toddlers. ECC usually begins on the upper front teeth and develops in the back (molar) teeth as these teeth appear in the mouth. Causes of ECC are discussed below.



### **Good diet habits start early**

Eating patterns, as well as the types of foods and drinks given to young children are very important. The risk of tooth decay can increase if children eat too often throughout the day. Sugary foods and drinks are known to cause tooth decay. Foods that stick to teeth for long periods of time, such as sticky toffees, can also lead to tooth decay. There is growing concern about the effects of acidic foods and acidic drinks such as fruit juices and soft drinks on teeth.

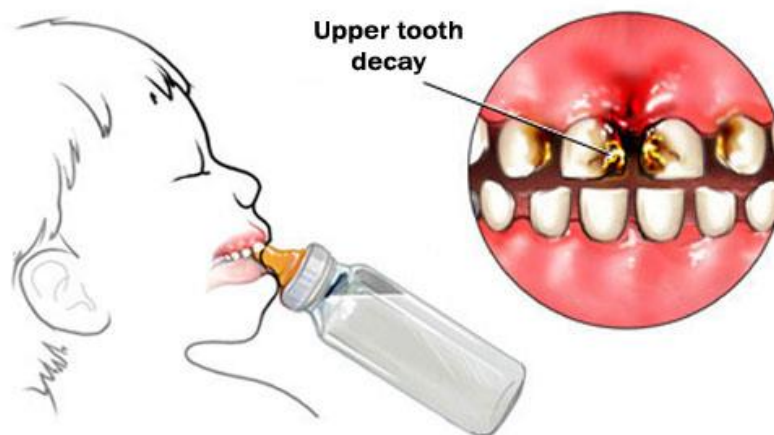
If infants and toddlers are allowed to suckle for prolonged or frequent periods during the day or night (longer than needed for nutritional purposes), their teeth may be more at risk of

developing decay. Any sweet fluids in baby bottles, other than water, can cause early tooth decay. Sweet fluids include flavoured milk, juices, cordials and soft drinks. The problem is made worse in infants and toddlers who suckle during sleep times because only a small amount of saliva is produced in the mouth while sleeping. Good saliva flow is important to protect teeth against decay.

Early tooth decay can also result from the frequent use of a dummy that has been dipped into a sweetener such as honey.

### *Preventing Early Childhood Caries*

- Breastfeeding is best for your baby. If you are bottle feeding, give your baby the bottle only at feed times, or when he/she is hungry. Take the bottle away as soon as the baby has had enough.
- Do not put your baby in bed with a bottle containing anything other than water.
- Do not let your child walk around with a bottle.
- Never put soft drink, cordial, fruit juice or flavoured milk in your child's bottle.
- Try using alternative comfort at bed time like a teddy or blanket, singing a lullaby or telling a bedtime story.
- Try introducing the use of cup from about 6 months of age.
- Try to stop bottle use from about 12 months of age.
- If using a dummy, do not add flavouring.
- Brush your baby's teeth after feeding.



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*Water is best when your child is only thirsty*

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### *Hints for good oral health*

- Brush your child's teeth as soon as they appear.
- Use a small toothbrush with soft bristles.
- Use a pea size of low fluoride toothpaste.
- Brush your child's teeth twice a day.
- Teach your child to floss as early as possible and floss daily.
- Children should not be allowed to dispense toothpaste without supervision.
- Encourage your children to brush their own teeth but supervise and assist them until they are about 8 years of age.
- Save snacks and treats for special occasions.
- Foods like muesli bars, rollups, health bars and honey are not recommended as snacks. They contain high concentration of added and natural sugars and will stick to your child's teeth more readily. Fresh fruits and vegetables are the best choices.
- Eat less sugar.
- Do not add sugar to encourage fussy eaters. Continue to offer healthy foods and drinks.
- Do not reward or comfort with sweets.
- Water is the cheapest and best thirst quencher.
- Provide healthy mini meals throughout the days instead of allowing your child to snack on unhealthy snacks in between meals.
- Take your child for their first dental visit soon after their first birthday. A dental check-up at this early age will:
  - allow early detection of tooth decay and any other dental conditions
  - enable dental staff to give advice and give instruction on toothbrushing and flossing and on good eating habits

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*Remember, infant tooth decay is preventable. If you think your child has infant tooth decay, or you would like additional information about preventing it, contact a dental professional.*

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### **A Dental Health Education Project Brought To You By:**

**Dr. Vei Nee Phoon**  
**Wangaratta Dental Clinic**  
**36A & 36B Reid Street**  
**Wangaratta VIC 3677**  
**Tel: 03 57213763**  
**[info@wangerattadental.com](mailto:info@wangerattadental.com)**  
**<http://www.wangerattadental.com>**  
**<http://www.facebook.com/WangarattaDentalClinic>**  
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