



Oral hygiene for babies and toddlers

As part of a community campaign to promote good oral health care for babies and toddlers the Australian Dental Association (ADA) has developed oral hygiene guidelines and tips for parents and carers of young children. Additionally, the ADA has created a brochure, available from your dentist, which contains comprehensive information on caring for teeth during early childhood.

Recommendations for caring for Primary teeth

How to brush your baby's teeth

Once the baby or primary teeth start to appear, it is recommended that parents use a baby's toothbrush with a small head and soft, rounded bristles. Up to the age of 18 months the teeth should be brushed with plain water and preferably, teeth should be brushed twice a day - morning and evening.

There are special low-fluoride toothpastes that have been developed for children and these can be introduced from around the age of 18 months, however always read the directions on toothpaste for age suitability. Use only a smear of toothpaste and ensure your child spits out the toothpaste after brushing.

Store all toothpastes out of your child's reach. Some small children love the taste of toothpaste and will eat it if given the chance.

How to teach your child to brush their teeth

From around the age of four to five children should begin to learn how to brush their own teeth. Children do not have the manual skills to effectively clean their own teeth until around eight years of age. Until then tooth brushing should be a combined effort by parents and children.

Choose a position where you can easily see your child's mouth - for example, sit your child on your lap or stand behind your child with the head tilted back slightly.

Move the toothbrush gently in small circles to clean the front surfaces of your child's teeth. To reach inner surfaces, tilt the toothbrush. Avoid side-to-side scrubbing, which can damage teeth and gums. Brush the biting and grinding surfaces of back teeth with a gentle back and forth motion. Clean every surface of every tooth. Brush around the gum line of each tooth. In total you should aim to brush for about two minutes, with patience your child will soon learn to tolerate it.

Replace toothbrushes every three months or when bristles appear frayed. Frayed bristles are not effective at removing plaque and may scratch gums.

Most children should be brushing their own teeth with parental supervision, from eight years of age. By age 10, children should be able to brush their own teeth without the need for ongoing supervision.

Tips for your child for cleaning their own teeth

- Encourage your child to brush for at least two minutes. Set a timer or play a song that runs for two minutes, which helps children understand how long it takes to clean teeth

thoroughly

- Watch your child while they brush and remind them not to miss any of their teeth or the back of each tooth. Children usually forget to brush their back teeth (molars) and the inner tooth surfaces that face the tongue
- Encourage your child to brush teeth in a particular order to ensure cleaning of every tooth surface. For example, start with the back teeth or molars on the left side of the lower jaw, work around to the right side, then move to the upper jaw in a similar pattern
- Make sure your child brushes their tongue gently, which helps to remove decay-causing bacteria. This can be done with their toothbrush

Did you know?

Plaque-disclosing tablets (available from your dentist or pharmacist) contain food dye that turns plaque pink or red. These tablets can help you and your child to see if the brushing technique removes plaque from every tooth surface.

Flossing

When your child is about two and a half years old, flossing can be done daily and at a minimum, at least twice a week. Flossing helps remove decay causing bacteria from between the teeth and keeps gums healthy. Slide the floss between the teeth, and gently work it up and down, against the surfaces of each tooth. Do not snap the floss down between the teeth as the floss may cut into the gum and cause bleeding. After flossing, rinse with water, then brush (or if you prefer, brush then floss).

If you find flossing your child's teeth difficult, ask your dentist to show you how to do it. Floss holders can be purchased that make flossing easier for some children.

Did you know?

Dentists have found a link between suffering from gum or *periodontal* disease and a serious heart condition known as *cardiovascular* disease. Flossing significantly reduces the risk of suffering from periodontal disease, which in turn decreases the chance of getting cardiovascular disease.

Toddler taming

If your toddler resists brushing or cannot sit still for two minutes, then try these suggestions:

- Consider a battery-powered brush, which adds novelty to cleaning their teeth
- Sing nursery rhymes or play a favourite song while you help your child brush their teeth
- Offer a reward every time your toddler allows you to brush for two minutes
- Encourage your preschooler to practise teeth cleaning (under your supervision) to instill good oral hygiene habits from an early age. Use a combination of "show and tell" methods. For example, you could brush your teeth as your child imitates you; then next time, tell your child how to brush while you watch

Make flossing and brushing as much fun as you can to avoid any negative association or resistance. Talk to your dentist if you need advice.

Importance of setting a good example

Children tend to imitate their parents' behaviours. If oral hygiene and dental care are important to you, they will be important to your child. Talk to your child about the importance of healthy teeth.

A child who understands that permanent teeth have to last a lifetime is more likely to take care of them. Visit your dentist regularly to maintain your own oral health which will in turn benefit your child.

Did you know?

Sharing spoons or tasting your baby's food with the same spoon can transfer decay causing bacteria to your child. Keep a set of spoons for your baby's use only. Wash a dropped dummy under running tap water - don't clean it in your mouth as doing so may transfer decay causing bacteria.

Visit www.ada.org.au for more information on oral care for babies and toddlers.