Caring for Your Baby's Teeth

After weeks of watching your baby drool and fuss, you finally spot that first little tooth bud popping up through the gums. Over the next couple of years, your baby's gummy smile will gradually be replaced by two rows of baby teeth.

Baby teeth may be small, but they're important. They act as placeholders for adult teeth. Without a healthy set of baby teeth, your child will have trouble chewing and speaking clearly. That's why caring for baby teeth and keeping them decay-free is so important.

Caring for Baby's Gums

You can start caring for baby's gums right away. But at first, the care won't involve a toothbrush and toothpaste. Instead, take these steps:

Get a soft, moistened washcloth or piece of gauze.
Gently wipe down your baby's gums at least twice a day.
Especially wipe your baby's gums after feedings and before bedtime.

This will wash off bacteria and prevent them from clinging to gums. Bacteria can leave behind a sticky plaque that damages infant teeth as they come in.

Brushing Baby's Teeth

When the first baby teeth start to pop up, you can graduate to a toothbrush. Choose one with a soft brush, small head and a large handle.

At first, just wet the toothbrush. As soon as teeth erupt, you can start using a bit about the size of a grain of rice. You can increase this to a peas sized amount of fluoride toothpaste when your child is 3 years old. Brush gently all around your child's baby teeth -- front and back.

You should brush your baby's teeth until he or she is old enough to hold the brush. Continue to supervise the process until your child can rinse and spit without assistance. That usually happens at around age 6.

Keep on the lookout for any signs of baby tooth decay -- brown or white spots or pits on the teeth. If you or your pediatrician notices any problems, take your child to a pediatric dentist for an exam.

Even if there isn't a problem, your child should go for his or her first dentist visit by age 1. The dentist can give you advice about:

- baby tooth care
- teething
- fluoride
- thumb sucking
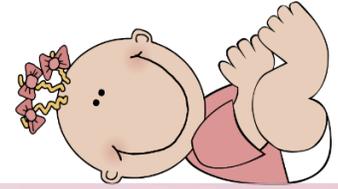
Teething

It can take two years before all of the infant teeth have made their way through your baby's gums. The process as each tooth emerges is called "teething." It can be a trying time for you and your baby.

Teething is uncomfortable. That's why your baby cries and fusses in the days or weeks before each baby tooth pops up. Babies can display other teething symptoms, too, including:

- drooling
- swollen gums
- slightly higher than normal temperature

Here are a few tips to relieve your baby's teething pain:

Teething rings. Let your baby chew on a clean, cool teething ring or cold washcloth. Just avoid giving your child anything that is small enough to choke on. Also avoid a teething ring with liquid inside that could break open.

Gum rubbing. Rub your baby's gums with a clean finger.

Pain relief. Topical pain relievers are rubbed on the gums. Those that contain benzocaine should not be used for teething. The FDA warns that such products can cause dangerous, potentially life-threatening side effects. Give your baby Tylenol (acetaminophen) occasionally to relieve pain -- but ask your pediatrician first. Never give your child aspirin. It has been linked with a rare but serious condition called Reye's syndrome in children.

Preventing Cavities

In addition to caring for baby teeth, you need to protect them. To prevent cavities, only fill your baby's bottle with:

- formula
- breast milk
- water

Avoid giving your child fruit juices, sodas, and other sugary drinks. Sweet drinks -- even milk -- can settle on the teeth. This can lead to baby tooth decay -- also known as "baby bottle tooth decay." Bacteria feed on the sugar from sweet drinks and produce acid, which attacks baby's teeth.

If you have to send your baby to bed or naps with a bottle or sippy cup, fill it with water only. Also avoid putting anything sweet -- such as sugar or honey -- on your baby's pacifier.

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