

FIRST SMILES

Start early and prevent dental decay

A baby's first smile is a moment to be treasured and is often considered a significant milestone in the baby's development. As a parent you play an important role in keeping this smile healthy and free of dental decay.

Dental decay

Dental decay (or caries) is the most common dental problem in children. Ten percent of Australian children aged four to six years have eight or more teeth affected by dental decay¹.

If dental decay is left untreated, it can cause severe pain, dental infections and eating difficulties. It can affect the child's appearance, self-esteem and general health.

How does dental decay occur?

When we eat and drink, the bacteria in dental plaque convert the sugar to acid. This acid leaches the minerals out of the tooth enamel. This process is called demineralisation and when it occurs frequently over a period of time, the tooth surface breaks down and a cavity is formed. The more often we have sweetened or acidic foods (especially if they stick to our teeth), the more likely we will get dental decay.

To prevent dental decay start early

- Breast feed and when the time is right, wean your child straight to a drinking cup. Alternatively, if the child is bottle-fed, replace the nursing bottle with a drinking cup at the age of 12 months.
- Never put cordial, juice, soft drink, sweetened syrups, or added sugar in the nursing bottle.
- Give your child fluoridated tap water to drink between meals (or regular feeds) and at night.

- Encourage your child to eat a wide range of nutritious foods. At snack time, choose foods and drinks that are low in salt, fat and sugar.
- Don't put any substances on the dummy, especially not honey, condensed milk, jam or chocolate syrup.

As decay causing bacteria can be transferred from your mouth to your child's mouth, avoid sharing toothbrushes, spoons, and drink bottles with your child.

Cleaning

- Start cleaning your child's teeth and gums as soon as the first tooth appears. Clean every day with a clean moistened face cloth or the child's own small soft toothbrush.
- Low fluoride toothpaste (specially formulated for children under the age of six years) should only be introduced when the child can spit out. This is around the age of two years.
- Replace the child's toothbrush when it begins to show wear or every three months, whichever comes first.

Visit a dental clinic

It is recommended that children start to visit a dental clinic on a regular basis from the age of 12 months. The Dental Health Program provides free dental checkups for children under five years of age.

For more information or to make a dental appointment for your child, contact:

Belconnen Health Centre	6205 1541
Civic Dental Clinic	6205 5111
Phillip Health Centre	6205 1463
Tuggeranong Health Centre	6205 2768

Reference:

1. Armfield JM, Roberts-Thompson KF & Spencer AJ 2003. The Child Dental Health Survey, Australia 1999: Trends across the 1990's. AIHW Cat. No. DEN 95. Adelaide: The University of Adelaide (AIHW Dental Statistics and Research Series No. 27).

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