

## Caring for Children's Teeth

Clean and healthy teeth contribute to children's wellbeing. Parents play a key role in the care of their children's teeth. Regular check-ups, good oral hygiene and healthy eating habits contribute to a bright, healthy smile – lifelong.

### **CHILDREN – under three years of age**

**Sucking** is instinctive and gives babies a sense of security. Babies should be encouraged to suck a pacifier rather than their fingers as it is harder to discourage finger-sucking later. **Breast milk** is an important part of a child's diet for the whole of the first year of life but once a child starts teething, at the age of six to eight months, night feeds should be reduced. Bottle-feeding of milk should be stopped, and a child should be offered only water to drink during the night. **NEVER** give a child fruit juice in a bottle, day or night, as the sugar damages the teeth and the natural acids erode the enamel. Never put anything sweet on the pacifier as sugary food or drink will harm the child's teeth.

When **teething**, a child may experience such symptoms as pain and itching in the gums. However, sustained fever is never due to teething. All twenty milk teeth have usually emerged by the age of three, and the use of a pacifier should then be stopped.

Good oral hygiene is necessary for children and teeth must be cleaned, even if this is not always easy. It is advisable to have children under the age of three lie on their backs while the teeth are cleaned, e.g. on a changing-table or held by a parent. The child's head rests in the lap of a

parent who brushes the teeth, while the “assisting” parent can hold the child still or distract his or her attention. Use a toothbrush with dense, soft bristles on a compact head that fits the adult hand. Use toothpaste with a fluoride content of 0.1-0.15% as fluoride hardens the dental enamel. Use a small amount of toothpaste – an amount equivalent to one-quarter of the size of the child’s little fingernail – as the child will swallow the toothpaste.

The child’s lips and cheeks can be held free of the teeth with the fingers of one hand, while brushing with the other hand. Brush the teeth for about two minutes. Teeth must be brushed twice a day, for instance, after breakfast and then very thoroughly before bed. Find times which suit both parents and child.

### **CHILDREN aged 3-6**

Children aged 3-6 years can be sat in a “parent’s chair”: the parent sits with crossed legs, forming a seat for the child. The child’s back is towards the parent, and the child’s head rests on the parent’s thigh. The fingers of one hand are used to hold the lips and cheeks free while brushing.

It is a good idea to have a routine, starting in one place, for instance the inner side of the teeth, on the left. The brush hairs are placed obliquely to the gums. Brush away from the gums. Then brush the biting surface of the molars, cleaning the fissures thoroughly. Continue to the outer surface of the molars and brush thoroughly behind the back tooth. Brush the canine and incisor areas thoroughly. When the back of the incisors is brushed, the brush must be held vertically and moved up and down. Then brush the other three sectors of the mouth in the same way.

Children under the age of six should not apply toothpaste to the brush themselves. Use a dab of fluoride toothpaste the size of the child's little fingernail. The fluoride in the toothpaste will work for longer if the mouth is not rinsed after brushing. It is enough to spit out excess toothpaste.

**Floss** must be used regularly, preferably every day, by both adults and children. Flossing cleans the tooth surfaces that brushing does not reach. Children should start flossing from the age of three or four.

Preferably floss first, then brush. Wind the floss around the index fingers of the right and the left hand, and carefully press it between the teeth, right down to the space between the teeth and the gum. Rub the taut floss up and down the side of the tooth, first on one side the gap, then on the other side.

Floss in a holder is used in the same way. Floss all the gaps between the teeth, both upper and lower.

### **CHILDREN aged 6-12**

From the age of six to twelve years, children's milk teeth are replaced by permanent (adult) teeth. The first permanent teeth, the six-year molars, erupt behind the existing primary molars. They must be kept clean, as new permanent teeth are susceptible to decay. Milk teeth are then gradually replaced by permanent incisors, canine teeth and premolars, and finally the twelve-year molars erupt behind the six-year molars. Both six- and twelve-year molars must be brushed from side to side, using fluoride toothpaste, twice daily. Most ten to twelve year olds are capable of brushing their own teeth, but it is important for parents to continue to supervise, and some children will continue to need assistance with flossing. It is advisable to provide additional fluoride, for instance with

fluoride mouthwash, as fluoride hardens the tooth enamel. As during the night saliva production is at a minimum, it is important to clean the teeth before going to bed and to sleep with clean teeth. Saliva plays a crucial role in keeping teeth healthy.

## **DENTAL DECAY**

**White plaque** which is left on the teeth leads to tooth decay. Certain types of bacteria stick to the surface of the teeth, forming plaque. The more often sugar is eaten, the faster the plaque will form. *The first sign of early tooth decay is dull whiteness in the enamel, under the plaque.*

*Consult a dentist without delay, as the spread of decay can be hindered at this stage by dental check-ups, better oral hygiene, more fluoride and healthy eating.*

*Enamel dissolves rather slowly, but once the decay has eaten through the enamel to the dentine it progresses more rapidly. When decay approaches the pulp, it leads to swelling, pressure and toothache. A child with toothache should be taken to a dentist without delay.*

## **CHILDREN AT RISK OF TOOTH DECAY**

Some children need **intensive dental care**, and here parents play an even more vital role. Children who are at risk for dental decay must have frequent check-ups, fluoride treatment provided by a dentist, intensive oral hygiene at home, together with fluoride tablets; healthy diet is also vital.

The recommended daily dose of fluoride for children aged under six years is one tablet (0.25 mg) if:

- they take medication on a daily basis due to illness or disability,
- they eat/drink frequently, both day and night,
- they have dental decay in early or more advanced stages which is difficult to control,
- their dental hygiene is poor,
- they are rarely taken for dental check-ups.

In addition, from the age of six children should rinse regularly with fluoride solution or take fluoride tablets if:

- their adult teeth are erupting, or they are having orthodontic treatment,
- they often eat between meals and drink large quantities of sweet or fizzy drinks.

Parents: Our children's dental health is in our hands.

*August 2010.*

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