



AUSTRALIAN DENTAL
ASSOCIATION INC.



Oral Hygiene for Babies and Toddlers

Babies and toddlers are at just as much risk of dental decay as an older child or adult, so caring for your baby's teeth needs to begin at birth. By establishing good oral hygiene habits early, your child will be well equipped to have healthy teeth for life.

How to brush your baby's teeth

Even before your baby's teeth appear, you should gently wipe their gums with a moistened soft cloth once a day. Once your baby's primary teeth start to appear, you should use a toothbrush specially designed for babies, with a small head and soft, rounded bristles to gently massage their teeth and gums. Up to the age of 18 months, your baby's teeth should be brushed with plain water, once a day after the last feed in the evening.

Tooth brushing for your baby can be done more easily with them lying on a bed or change table. The time taken to brush can be increased slowly until the baby is able to tolerate a two minute brushing as a toddler.

Once your toddler has become accustomed to brushing and during their third year, introduce brushing teeth twice a day – in the morning after their breakfast and in the evening just before bed.

There are special low-fluoride toothpastes that have been developed for young children. These can be introduced from around the age of 18 months - read the directions on the toothpaste for age suitability. Only a smear of toothpaste is needed, and encourage your child to spit out the excess toothpaste.

If your child isn't able to spit out after brushing, continue using a smear of low fluoride toothpaste and wipe their mouth with a washer or tissue. It's really important to keep brushing their teeth and there is variability in the age at which children learn to spit out.

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. Consuming toothpaste can cause dental fluorosis, which is why you need to keep toothpaste out of reach of young children.

IMPORTANT:

If you do not have access to fluoridated drinking water then it may be necessary to vary this advice. Consult with your local oral health professional regarding your specific individual needs.

Learning to brush

From around the age of four to five children should begin to learn how to brush and care for their own teeth. Children do not have the skills to properly clean their own teeth until around eight years of age, so until then, tooth brushing should be a combined effort by you and your child.

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 their 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 your child's teeth and gums. Brush the biting and grinding surfaces of back teeth with a firm back and forth motion, and be sure to clean every surface of every tooth.

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For more information on caring for your teeth visit the ADA's website:
www.ada.org.au

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In total, you should aim to brush for about two minutes. It will take time for your child to allow you to clean their teeth for that length of time, however it's important that their teeth are brushed twice a day, working up to two minutes as they get older.

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

Did you know?

Plaque-disclosing tablets or drops (available from your dentist or pharmacist) contain food dye that turns plaque pink or red. Using these can be a fun way to help you and your child to see if the brushing technique you are using removes plaque from every tooth surface.

Flossing

When your child is about two and a half years old, you can try introducing them to flossing their teeth. Flossing helps remove decay causing bacteria from between their teeth and keeps their gums healthy. It will take time for your child to get used to having their teeth flossed, however, ideally their teeth should be flossed twice a week in areas where the teeth are touching.

Slide the floss between your child's 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 hurt their gums. After flossing, have your child rinse with water, then brush (or if you prefer, brush then floss) your child's teeth.

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

Toddler taming

If your toddler resists teeth cleaning or struggles to sit still for two minutes, try these suggestions:

- Consider a battery-powered tooth 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 child to practise teeth cleaning (under your supervision) to instill good oral hygiene habits in them from an early age. Some toddlers like to be independent so it is a good idea for them to use one toothbrush while you use another one and take turns at brushing
- Make flossing and brushing as much fun as you can to avoid any negative association or resistance. Be sure to talk to your dentist if you need more advice

It's important to set a good example

Children tend to imitate their parents' behaviours. If oral hygiene and looking after your teeth 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 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.