

Baby's first teeth

A child's primary teeth, sometimes called "baby teeth," are as important as the permanent adult teeth.

Primary teeth, which often begin to appear when children are about 6 months old, help them chew and speak. They also hold space in the jaws for permanent teeth that are developing under the gums.

The front four teeth usually erupt first, beginning as early as 6 months after birth.

Most children have a full set of 20 primary teeth by the age of 3 years. The primary teeth generally begin to shed, or fall out, at about 6 years of age. The first of the 32 permanent teeth begin to appear about the same time.

Begin brushing your child's teeth with a little water as soon as the first tooth appears. If you are considering using toothpaste before the child is 2 years of age, ask your dentist or physician first.

Supervise toothbrushing to make sure children older than 2 years of age use only a pea-sized amount of fluoride toothpaste and avoid swallowing it. Children should be taught to spit out remaining toothpaste and rinse with water after brushing. Most children will be able to brush on their own by the age of 6 or 7 years. Parents should be using floss or an interdental cleaner on

their children's teeth as soon as any two teeth touch. Cleaning between the teeth is important because it removes plaque where a toothbrush cannot reach. Brush your child's teeth twice a day unless your dentist recommends otherwise.

The American Dental Association recommends that a child be seen by a dentist as soon as his or her first tooth erupts, but at least no later than the first birthday. A dental visit at an early age is a "well baby checkup" for the teeth. Besides

checking for tooth decay and other problems, the dentist can demonstrate how to clean the child's teeth properly and how to evaluate any adverse habits such as thumb-sucking.

As the permanent molars appear, dental sealants may be recommended. Sealants form a thin barrier that helps protect the chewing surfaces from the effects of

decay-causing bacteria.

Help your children maintain a lifelong healthy smile by providing them with a well-balanced diet, limiting snacks, ensuring that they brush twice per day and floss once per day, and scheduling regular dental checkups for them. ■

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