

# Mealtime Memo

## for Child Care

### Early Dental Care Is Essential

Early dental care is an important part of preventive health care. Healthy child check ups are routine during the first few years of life. The same is not true for early dental care. Yet, early prevention can set the stage for less dental caries (cavities) later in life. The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) encourages doctors to include dental health in well-child checks.

Cavities occur when the tooth surface is damaged by acid. In the mouth, bacteria use carbohydrate-rich foods, both sugars and starches, for food. In the process, bacteria produce acid. The acid stays in the mouth for about 20 minutes, attacking the tooth surface. The presence of bacteria in the mouth is normal. Key to prevention of cavities is the control of factors that reduce risk of cavities. According to AAP, three main factors for preventing dental caries are diet, oral hygiene habits, and fluoride use, when needed.

### Diet and Cavity Connection

Bacteria produce acid when sugars and starches are present in the mouth. Choose foods served at meals and snacks to reduce cavity risk. When snack foods rich in sugars and starches are limited, cavity risk lowers.



### Oral Hygiene Habits

Oral hygiene, keeping the mouth clean, helps reduce cavity risk in two ways. First, it removes carbohydrates from the mouth. Second, it removes the film that bacteria form on teeth. Brush teeth several times each day, after meals and snacks whenever possible.

Did you know an adult passes harmful bacteria, including the ones that produce cavities, when

- An adult puts a pacifier in their mouth before giving it to an infant, or
- An adult touches an infant's feeding spoon to their mouth?

## Fluoride Facts

Fluoride is a mineral the body needs in small amounts. Fluoride is usually found in water. Fluoride helps make the surface of teeth strong. However, too much fluoride can damage the tooth surface. Follow doctor's orders for drops or tablets; heed warnings and don't let children swallow toothpastes or dental rinses.



## Infancy

Breastfeeding during the first year or longer is encouraged. Breast milk does not promote tooth decay.

After each feeding, wipe the infant's gums with a piece of moist gauze or clean cloth. Once teeth erupt, use a child-size toothbrush and water to clean teeth after meals and naptime or bedtime bottles.

Parents should consult a doctor about the need for extra fluoride in infancy. Be sure to tell the doctor if bottled water is used to make formula. Most bottled waters do not have fluoride. It is critical to follow directions for extra fluoride sources to avoid the tooth damage that results from too much fluoride.

## Ages 1 to 2

- Discontinue pacifier or bottle use by age 1. Limit liquids in bottles, if still used, to plain water.
- Use water in sippy cups if children will have access to the cups for long periods during the day.
- Limit milk and juice to meals or snacks.
- Do not serve soft drinks, fruit punches, or sugar sweetened drinks to young children.
- Serve fruit more often than juice. Limit 100% fruit juice to 4-ounces per day.
- Brush teeth after meals and snacks, using a small, soft brush and water.
- First dental care visit is recommended at age 1 by both doctors and dentists.



## Ages 2 to 5

- Avoid serving sweets and sticky foods between meals. On the occasion these foods are served, include with a meal or snack. Brush teeth after eating sweets.
- Only after a child is old enough to not swallow toothpaste is it okay to use a very small amount of fluoride toothpaste. An amount the size of a child's littlest fingernail is enough. Children need very close supervision when brushing teeth with paste. This may be an activity best monitored at home. Water and small brushes may be more practical for after meals and snacks where groups of children are cared for.
- Once a tooth surface touches the side of another tooth surface, daily flossing is needed.
- Regular dental visits, twice a year, are recommended.
- Studies show that school-age children have fewer cavities than they did years ago, but rates are not lower among the under 5-years-old age group. By using these guidelines, reduction of cavities in the youngest age group is possible. Prevent cavities in baby teeth today to help assure a lifetime of beautiful smiles.



## Sources

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