

# Chapter 11

## Caring for Babies' Gums and Teeth

### What's In This Chapter?

By the end of this chapter, child care providers will be able to:

- 1 Describe why it is important to keep a baby's gums and teeth clean and healthy.
- 2 Identify signs of tooth decay.
- 3 List at least three ways to keep a young child's gums and teeth clean and healthy.

As a child care provider, you play an important role in maintaining the health of the babies in your care. Keeping a baby's gums and teeth clean helps to contribute to the baby's overall health.



*A young child brushing her teeth.*



*Parent helping a young child brush his teeth.*

### What Is Tooth Decay?

**Tooth decay** (cavities) is common in young children. About one out of every five children (ages 5 to 11 years) has at least one cavity that has not been treated by a dentist. Tooth decay in babies is sometimes called “early childhood caries” or “**baby bottle tooth decay.**”

### What Causes Tooth Decay?

The sugar from foods and beverages is used by bacteria in the mouth to make acids that can cause damage to teeth. When a baby sleeps with a bottle in his or her mouth, the sugary liquid from the bottle can pool around the teeth and gums. Bacteria use the sugars in the liquid to grow, which can lead to tooth decay.

## Why Should Tooth Decay Be Prevented?

Tooth decay can be painful for babies and can cause infections and early tooth loss. This can affect a child's ability to eat and speak, which can affect his or her overall health and development. If a child's baby teeth are healthy, it is more likely his or her adult teeth will be healthy too.



Healthy Baby Teeth



Moderate to Severe Tooth Decay of Baby Teeth



Moderate to Severe Tooth Decay of Baby Teeth

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## How Can I Help Prevent Tooth Decay?

You can help babies have healthy teeth. Remember to:

- only put breastmilk or formula in bottles and no other liquids unless the **health care provider** indicates otherwise.
- never put a baby to bed with a bottle.
- avoid propping bottles in cribs, swings, or car seats.
- never dip a baby's pacifier in honey, syrup, or sugar.
- offer foods and beverages only when the baby is hungry. Do not let the child sip from a bottle or cup or snack constantly throughout the day.
- avoid letting children share pacifiers, bottles, cups, and utensils.
- choose foods that have no added sugars once the baby is developmentally ready for **solid foods**.
- once a baby is developmentally ready, start helping the baby transition from a bottle to a cup before 18 months of age.
- encourage parents to plan the child's first dentist visit. A child's first dental visit should take place after his or her first tooth comes in, but no later than his or her first birthday.





*Child care provider helping a baby brush his teeth.*

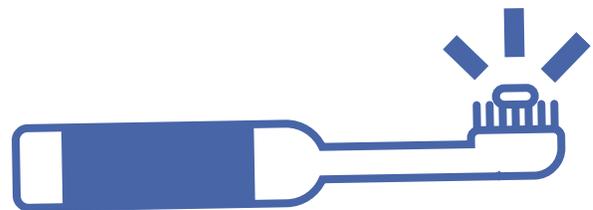
## How Do I Take Care of a Baby's Gums and Teeth?

Taking care of a baby's gums and teeth should start as soon as the baby is born. Encourage parents to use a clean, soft washcloth to wipe the baby's gums after each feeding. Once the baby has one or more teeth, a soft toothbrush with a small amount of toothpaste that contains fluoride (about the size of a grain of rice) can be used to gently brush the baby's teeth.

The American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry recommends that child care providers brush babies' teeth at least once daily after a meal or snack. Some child care sites help children learn about healthy habits by building in tooth brushing as part of their daily activities.

### **Teething**

When teeth start to come in and push through the gums, it is called teething. Teething is normal, but may cause the baby to be uncomfortable. It is important to make sure any items that a baby puts in his or her mouth to help with teething are clean and that there is no risk of choking. Never dip a pacifier or other item in honey, sugar, or syrup. The sharing of utensils, cups, pacifiers, or teething toys should be avoided as well.



## In This Chapter

In this chapter, you have learned about how to care for babies' teeth and gums. In the next chapter, you will learn about strategies for communicating and partnering with families to provide babies the best care possible.



Following good feeding practices can help children have healthy teeth. Transitioning babies from a bottle to a cup before 18 months of age is one example.



A child's first dental visit should take place after his or her first tooth comes in, but no later than his or her first birthday.



Before the baby has teeth, wipe his or her gums using a clean, soft washcloth after each feeding.



The practice of propping a bottle up in a car seat or swing can lead to tooth decay and possibly cause choking.



Once the baby has one or more teeth, a soft toothbrush with a small amount of toothpaste that contains fluoride (about the size of a grain of rice) can be used to gently brush the baby's teeth.

## Check Your Knowledge

**A mother brings her baby to** your child care center with a bottle of juice. What are some things you can tell the mother about juice and tooth decay?

- A** Tooth decay is a common infection in babies and can cause them to lose their teeth too early.
- B** Juice can be served to babies of any age and won't cause tooth decay because the baby's teeth have not all come in yet.
- C** Tooth decay can cause pain and serious infections.
- D** A and C.
- E** All of the above.

**2. Which of the following** can cause tooth decay?

- A** The sugar from foods and beverages.
- B** The liquid that pools around the teeth and gums when a baby falls asleep with a bottle in his or her mouth.
- C** Children and adults sharing utensils.
- D** All of the above.

ANSWERS: 1. D • 2. D