

Tooth Care for Children

What's the best way to brush my child's teeth?

Use a small, soft, toothbrush and a tiny amount of fluoride toothpaste. Until your child turns 2, use a dot of toothpaste the size of a grain of rice (or a thin smear). After the second birthday, you can use a pea-size amount. For kids age 5 and older, use an amount the size of a small bean. To avoid giving your child too much fluoride, be sure to follow these recommendations.

Twice a day (in the morning and at night after eating dinner), gently brush the teeth on both the inside and outside surfaces, as well as the tongue, to dislodge bacteria that can cause bad breath. Once you think your child can master it, teach her to rinse with water.

Replace the toothbrush as soon as the bristles start to look worn or splayed.

Your child's dentist may also recommend flossing between any tooth surfaces that are touching. The best time to do this is right after brushing so that the floss will draw fluoride from the toothpaste down between the teeth. (There's no evidence that flossing baby teeth makes a difference, but many dentists still recommend flossing just to be on the safe side.)

When can I let my child start brushing her own teeth?

As soon as she's willing and able, it's a good idea to let your child try to brush her own teeth, even though she probably won't be able to do a good job of it until she's about 7 years old or so.

In the meantime, brush your teeth while she's doing hers, and then "check" each other's teeth to see if they're clean. Tell her you'll get the spots she "missed" and let her get your "missed spots," too.

What can I do if my child won't brush?

If your child fusses every time it's time to brush, it might help to buy him a toothbrush with a special cartoon character on it.

Liz Birka White, a mother of three in Diablo, California, says this worked well for all her children. "Adam, my firstborn, really hated brushing until I bought him an Elmo toothbrush. From that day on, he couldn't get enough. It was just the ticket I needed to interest him in brushing."

You can also let your child have several brushes in different colors so that he can choose the one he wants when it's time to brush.

Does my child need fluoride?

Developing teeth can benefit from a little fluoride. This mineral prevents tooth decay by strengthening tooth enamel and making it more resistant to acids and harmful bacteria. Your child can get fluoride from toothpaste and from water.

Most municipal water supplies are fortified with adequate fluoride. (Call your local water authority to find out about yours.) If yours isn't, or if you get your water from a well, consider buying a test kit from your local health department, a hardware store, or a pharmacy.

If the results show a fluoride content of less than .3 parts per million, ask your child's doctor or dentist whether you should give your child a supplement. (The recommended dosage per day is .25 milligrams for children under 3, .5 mg for kids 3 to 6, and 1 mg for kids over 6).

You can get a prescription for a fluoride supplement in the form of drops or chewable tablets.

Bottled water and fruit juices may also contain fluoride, although the amount isn't always listed on the label.

Keep in mind that while little fluoride is a good thing for your child's teeth, swallowing too much of it over time can lead to a condition called fluorosis, which can cause white spots to show up on your child's adult teeth. This is why it's important not to use too much toothpaste, especially before your child learns to rinse and spit it out.

Are certain foods more likely to cause tooth decay

Yes. Don't overdo sweets (including fruit, juice, and foods such as peanut butter and jelly) or starchy foods (such as breads, crackers, pasta, pretzels), as both can contribute to cavities. Avoid sticky foods, such as dried fruit, that don't easily wash off the teeth.

When you do give your child sugary or starchy foods, serve them at mealtime rather than as snacks.

When should I start taking my child to the dentist?

Experts agree that you should bring your child to the dentist by her third birthday unless you notice dental problems before the time. If you haven't taken your child for a dental checkup, make an appointment as soon as possible. Then follow the dentist's guidelines for follow-up visits based on your child's needs.

If you can't afford dental care for your child, consider getting in touch with your local health department to find out about resources.