

New Parents: A Guide for Your Infant's Dental Care

By Dr. Jack Fletcher, Family Dentist

Congratulations on your new arrival. Choices you are making for your new baby begin to effect a baby's jaw, facial development and teeth soon after birth – from opting to breastfeed, bottle feed, use a pacifier or not, allow thumb sucking and the types of fluids you feed your new baby. (For more see article on Facial Development here....

However, cleaning an infant's gums and teeth is simple – it's just a matter of wiping rather than brushing. Infants have a very strong suckling reflex for over a year, so if you put a brush in the mouth, it may be difficult to get it out. The easiest way to clean an infant's teeth and gums is with a terry cloth type of face cloth or there are finger cots made of terry cloth. All that is needed is that the cloth wipes the gums and teeth as best as possible. No toothpaste is required, but wetting the cloth may make it more comfortable. Don't fight to get this job done. Just keep at it a couple of times a day and the baby will become accustomed to the wiping and stop being difficult. When a child gets used to having their teeth cleaned at an early age, brushing teeth will be much easier to introduce. Removing excess milk and cracker bits will reduce the risk of thrush and cavities.

Avoid acidic foods, pops, and sticky foods. Water is the only liquid recommended before bed but my children did just fine with milk. Do not under any circumstances put a child to sleep with a bottle of juice or pop. This may seem like common sense but it continues to happen. In this Province, the greatest number of elective surgeries with general anaesthetic is children's dental work.

Brushing a child's teeth is easiest to do while the child is lying on a bed with no pillow under their head. Placing your thumb on the child's chin will help to open the mouth and provide control over mild side to side squirming. I like to see brushing start as soon as possible after the suckling reflex lessens. This is usually around one year old plus or minus three or four months. I found that showing the child what you want them to do works best, and I would sing a song and really exaggerated the words with as wide open a mouth as possible while still having the words properly sounded. The ABC song worked well.

It is wonderful when a child wants to do their own brushing, but make sure an adult follows the child's work with a thorough brushing and flossing. Flossing should be done by an adult until the age of ten or when the child can write their name in handwriting. I have seen children do very good flossing at age seven but that is very rare and should not be expected.

As a great learning tool, I like to recommend disclosing tablets to parents to help the child see where their brushing and flossing may be missing. I have these at my office. All my staff work hard to educate parents and children to help the child remain cavity-free. This is something we take great pride in and is one of our goals.