



Parents

Your Child's Teeth

Helpful tips for parents
and caregivers



ADA American Dental Association®

America's leading advocate for oral health

Set your child up with **healthy habits** for life

You can help your child learn healthy habits by cleaning their teeth every day, taking them to the dentist regularly, and eating healthy foods with them. This booklet will guide you through the steps to help your child have a healthy smile that lasts a lifetime.

Here's what's inside:

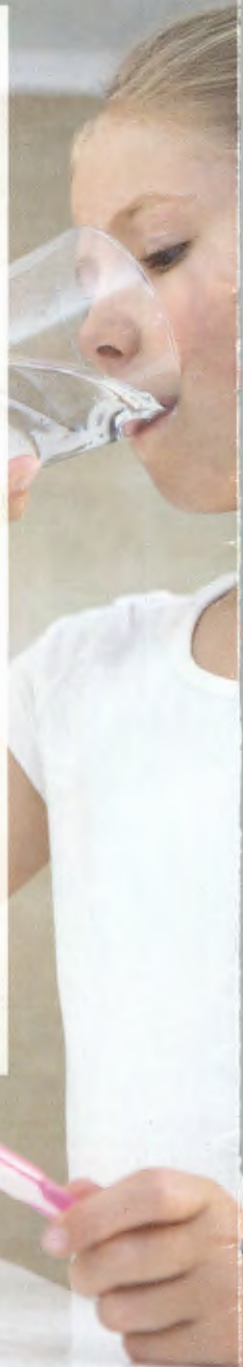
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Take Care of Yourself **Before** Your Baby Arrives

Keep your own teeth and gums healthy

While you are pregnant, continue to see your dentist regularly for oral exams and teeth cleanings. It is generally safe to have dental treatment during pregnancy.

It's important for your own health as well as your child's to have a healthy mouth before your child is born. A wide variety of bacteria live in your mouth, which is normal. When certain types of bacteria outgrow the others, this can lead to gum disease or tooth decay. Pregnancy can make your gums more sensitive to **plaque**, the sticky film of bacteria on your teeth. Your gums may become red and tender. They may bleed easily when you brush your teeth. This condition is an early stage of gum disease, called **gingivitis (jin-ji-VY-tis)**.

Gingivitis is common in pregnant women, and it can lead to more serious diseases of the gums and bone that hold your teeth in place. Your dentist may recommend that you get your teeth cleaned more often during your pregnancy.

You can lower your risk of developing tooth decay and gum disease by brushing your teeth twice a day and cleaning between your teeth daily.

Eat a healthy diet

What you eat during pregnancy affects the growth of your developing baby — including their teeth. Your baby's teeth begin to develop between months 3 and 6 of pregnancy. So, it's important that you take in enough nutrients, especially calcium, protein, phosphorous, and vitamins A, C, and D.

Be sure to get enough calcium in your diet for you and your baby by having at least 3 servings of dairy products or other calcium-rich foods each day. Or, your **obstetrician (OB/GYN)** may recommend that you take calcium pills.



You do not lose calcium from your teeth during pregnancy. Your diet — not your teeth — provides the calcium your baby needs.

Dental Care Basics for Your Child

Baby teeth can start to decay as soon as they appear

Other than water, sugar is in almost everything else that a baby drinks, including breast milk and formula. When teeth are in contact with liquids that contain sugar, decay can start. If decay is not treated, it can destroy baby teeth. That's why it's important for you to get in the habit of cleaning your baby's teeth every day.

As your child gets older, they may start to eat a more varied diet which may contain fruit juice, sports drinks and even soda. It's important to be aware that these sugary drinks are known to increase your child's risk to develop tooth decay.

Tooth decay that's not treated can lead to pain, loss of teeth, and loss of self-confidence. Children with tooth pain can't eat or sleep properly and may miss days of school. Even worse, decay may lead to an **abscess (pus-filled sac) formation**, which can cause serious or even life-threatening infections if it's not treated.



If decay isn't treated, it can destroy your child's teeth and cause other problems.



Tooth decay can be prevented with good oral care.

Taking time to prevent tooth decay from starting is less costly than repairing a decayed tooth.

Clean your child's teeth to help prevent cavities

Brushing and flossing remove **plaque**, the sticky film of bacteria on your teeth. Brush your child's teeth (and yours!) 2 times a day and for 2 minutes each time. You should clean between teeth with floss or another between-the-teeth cleaner every day.

BRUSH
TWO MINUTES
TWICE A DAY

FLOSS
EVERY DAY

How to brush your child's teeth

Brushing teeth the right way is important. You should brush your child's teeth until they have the skills to do it the right way on their own. If your child cannot tie their own shoes, then they are probably not ready to brush by themselves.

When you teach your child how to brush the right way, it may help to stand behind them and hold the brush while they watch in the mirror. Teach them to spit out all of the toothpaste after brushing.

Even after your child starts to brush their own teeth, you should still watch while they brush. This helps you make sure that they are cleaning their teeth the right way.

(For tips on cleaning a baby's teeth, see page 12.)

By around age 10 or 11, most children should be able to brush their teeth without supervision. If you're not sure if your child is ready, talk to your dentist or dental hygienist.

Make choosing a toothbrush a fun activity for you and your child. Find a child-sized toothbrush with soft bristles. Let your child pick the color and design. Make getting a new toothbrush a regular treat. You can also ask your dentist or hygienist if there is a powered toothbrush that is right for your child.

How much toothpaste should my child use?



For children under 3 years old, use a smear or grain-of-rice sized amount of toothpaste.



For children 3 to 6 years old, use a pea-sized amount of toothpaste.

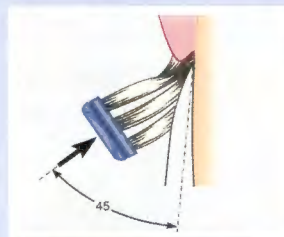


You may wish to stand behind her and hold the brush.

Here are some tips for proper brushing:



Place the toothbrush against the tooth where it meets the gums (also called the **gum line**).



Use a 45 degree angle to make sure you are fully reaching the gum line as well as the tooth surface.

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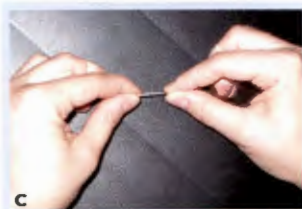


Move the brush back and forth gently in short, soft circles. Brush the outer surface of each tooth. Use the same strokes for the inside surfaces and chewing surfaces of the teeth.

Clean between your child's teeth every day

Cleaning between your child's teeth with floss or a floss aid removes plaque where toothbrush bristles can't reach.

Begin using floss or a floss aid when your child has 2 teeth that are next to each other. Flossing is not easy for children to do by themselves. The ADA recommends that you floss your child's teeth daily until they can do it alone, around age 10 or 11.



How to properly floss your child's teeth

- A. Break off a good amount of floss and wind most of it around your middle or index finger.
- B. Wind the rest of the floss around the same finger on your other hand. This finger will take up the used floss.
- C. Hold the floss tightly between your thumbs and index fingers.
- D. Guide the floss between your child's teeth, using a gentle rubbing motion. Don't snap the floss into their gums.
 - When the floss reaches the gum line, curve it so that it hugs the side of one tooth.
 - Gently slide it into the space between the gum and the tooth and rub the side of the tooth.
 - Move the floss away from the gum with up and down motions.
 - Repeat these steps on the rest of your child's teeth. As you move from tooth to tooth, unwind the clean floss with one finger and take up the used floss with the finger on the other hand. Don't forget the back side of the last tooth.
- E. Sometimes children as young as 5 years old can use a floss aid.

When your child is ready to floss, show them how to hold the floss so they can gently clean between their teeth. Just like with brushing, it's a good idea to watch them floss to make sure they are cleaning between all their teeth — including those in the back, which may be harder to reach.

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Look for the **ADA Seal of Acceptance** when choosing products like toothbrushes, toothpastes, floss, and floss aids. The ADA Seal means that the products have been tested and shown to be safe and effective.

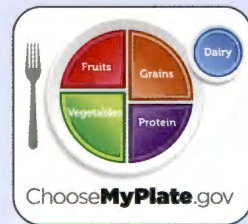
A healthy diet is important to your child's teeth

Food choices and eating patterns can affect whether your child has problems like tooth decay and cavities. A healthy diet that limits sugary beverages and snacks is good for overall well-being as well as for healthy teeth. A steady supply of sugary foods and drinks, including sports drinks, sodas, and energy drinks, can damage teeth. Acid from sugary foods and drinks can attack teeth for 20 minutes or longer. Over time, tooth decay can happen and cavities can form.

Offer water when your child is thirsty and nutritious foods such as fruit, carrot sticks or cheese if your child is hungry. These are healthier options than giving them cookies, candy, potato chips, and other sweet or sticky foods. Save sweets as an ending for mealtime, when the mouth makes more saliva to help rinse out food particles. Be aware that constant snacking, even snacking on nutritious foods like oranges and dried fruit, can increase risk of cavities because it means teeth are exposed to acid throughout the day.



Avoid giving your child snacks like sodas, chips, cookies, crackers, and candy. All of these can increase your child's risk of tooth decay and cavities.



For good dental and overall health, be sure your child eats nutritious foods from the major food groups. For more information about a healthy diet, visit choosemyplate.gov.



Fluoride is nature's cavity fighter!

Fluoride (FLOOR-eyed) is a mineral found in all natural sources of water — even the ocean. Fluoride helps protect tooth enamel from the acid attacks that cause tooth decay. It also helps repair weakened enamel before cavities form.

Children who drink tap water that has the recommended level of fluoride are less likely to get cavities than children who do not drink fluoridated water. If you are not sure your tap water has fluoride, ask your dentist.

Children get added protection from fluoride by getting it from more than one source. Other sources of fluoride include fluoride toothpastes, fluoride mouthrinses, and fluoride treatments applied in the dental office. Talk to your dentist or hygienist about your child's fluoride needs. Be sure to let them know if you use bottled water or a water treatment system at home.

Regular dental visits are important for healthy smiles

During a dental visit, your dentist and hygienist will check your child's mouth for gum and tooth health (no decay!). Tooth alignment and growth patterns will be monitored to watch for problems with your child's bite. Your dentist will also check to see that all of your child's teeth are being cleaned properly.

How often should your child see the dentist?

Children's needs differ, and your dentist is best able to suggest a schedule of visits for your child. The schedule of visits will depend on things like your child's eating habits, how well their teeth are cleaned, past treatment needs, and water fluoridation in your area.



Having your child visit the dentist for regular cleanings, fluoride treatments, and sealants can prevent tooth decay and reduce the need for further dental treatment. Plus, it can save you money in the future because preventing a dental problem now costs less than treating one later!

Special Tips for the Growing Years: Birth to Age 6

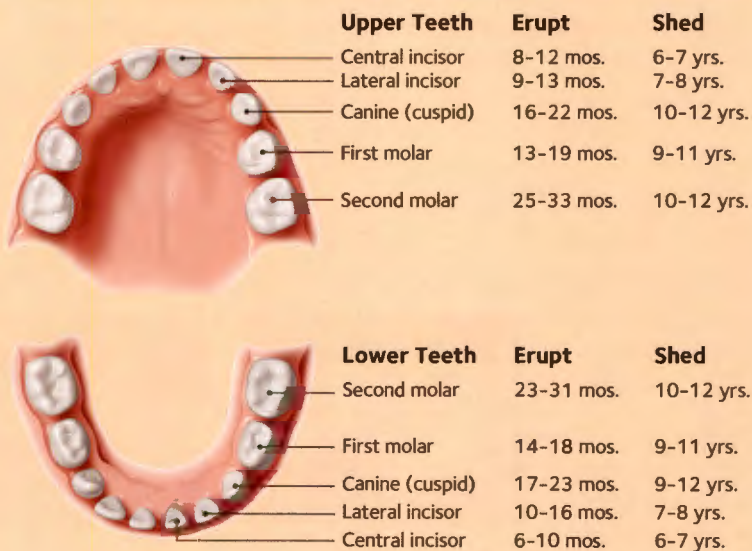
Your baby's teeth are important!

Baby teeth (also called **primary teeth**) help your child chew and speak. They also give the face its shape and hold space for adult teeth to come in the right way. These are just some of the reasons why it is so important to take good care of baby teeth!

Baby teeth start to come in when a child is about 6 months old. By age 3, most children have a full set of 20 baby teeth. Spaces between baby teeth are normal. It is also common that some teeth are in contact with those on either side.

Baby teeth fall out as your child develops and grows. This makes room for adult teeth (also called **permanent teeth**), which begin to come in around age 6.

Baby (Primary) Teeth



The diagram shows two views of a baby's mouth: the upper arch (top) and the lower arch (bottom). Each arch contains 10 primary teeth. Lines connect labels to the corresponding teeth in both arches. The eruption and shedding dates are listed in a table to the right of each arch.

| Upper Teeth | Erupt | Shed |
|-----------------|------------|------------|
| Central incisor | 8-12 mos. | 6-7 yrs. |
| Lateral incisor | 9-13 mos. | 7-8 yrs. |
| Canine (cuspid) | 16-22 mos. | 10-12 yrs. |
| First molar | 13-19 mos. | 9-11 yrs. |
| Second molar | 25-33 mos. | 10-12 yrs. |

| Lower Teeth | Erupt | Shed |
|-----------------|------------|------------|
| Second molar | 23-31 mos. | 10-12 yrs. |
| First molar | 14-18 mos. | 9-11 yrs. |
| Canine (cuspid) | 17-23 mos. | 9-12 yrs. |
| Lateral incisor | 10-16 mos. | 7-8 yrs. |
| Central incisor | 6-10 mos. | 6-7 yrs. |

This chart shows the name of each baby tooth and when each tooth usually comes in (erupts) and falls out (shed). Not all children get the same teeth at the same times. Your child's teeth may come in earlier or later than shown here.

Teething tips

As teeth come in, babies may have sore or tender gums. To help your baby feel better, you can:

- gently rub your baby's gums with a clean wet gauze, your finger, or a small, cool spoon
- give them a clean, chilled (not frozen) teething ring — but don't dip it anything sweet or in other foods
- if your baby is still cranky and uncomfortable, talk to their dentist or pediatrician



Do not use benzocaine-containing over-the-counter teething products such as Anbesol®, Hurrricane®, Orajel®, Baby Orajel®, and Orabase® and some prescription products to soothe sore gums in young children. **These products can cause serious reactions in children.** Details are available on the U.S. Food and Drug Administration website: fda.gov.

Decay in Baby Teeth

If decay is not treated, it can destroy baby teeth.



Healthy baby teeth



Initial decay

Prevent tooth decay in baby teeth

Tooth decay can begin as soon as your baby's teeth come in. Decay that's left untreated can lead to cavities and cause pain or infection.



Pacifiers:

- Do not put a pacifier or spoon in your mouth before giving it to your child. Decay-causing bacteria that's in your mouth can be passed on to them.
- Do not dip a pacifier or nipple of a bottle in anything sweet.



Bottles, Sipping, and Snacking:

- Do not give your baby fruit juice until after they turn 1 year old.
- Do not let your child sip sugary liquids all day (including juice drinks). Limit sugary liquids and sweets to mealtimes.
- Never put your child to bed with a bottle or training cup.
- Avoid giving your child sugary, chewy, sticky foods like candy, cookies, chips, or crackers. Give healthy snacks instead. You can find ideas at choosemyplate.gov.



Breastfeeding:

- After each time you breastfeed, wipe your baby's gums with a clean, moist gauze pad or washcloth.
- Once your child's first tooth comes in, be sure to brush their teeth after each feeding.



Moderate to severe decay



Moderate to severe decay



Severe decay

Clean your baby's teeth to prevent cavities

- Get into the habit of cleaning your baby's gums before they have teeth.
- After each feeding, wipe your baby's gums with a clean, damp gauze pad or washcloth.
- As soon as your baby's first tooth appears, start brushing their teeth twice a day (morning and night).
 - Use a soft-bristled, child-sized toothbrush.
 - Use only a smear or grain-of-rice-sized amount of fluoride toothpaste.
 - Position your child so you can see into the mouth easily. You might want to sit, resting their head in your lap. (See the brushing tips on page 5.)
- Begin cleaning between your child's teeth when they have 2 teeth come in that are next to each other that touch. (See the flossing tips on page 6.)



As soon as the first tooth appears, start brushing your child's teeth twice a day (morning and night). Use a child-sized toothbrush with soft bristles or a finger brush for better control.

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Sucking habits

Many infants and young children like to suck on thumbs, fingers, or pacifiers. Sucking is a natural reflex and necessary for feeding. However, sucking habits can cause problems. Their teeth may not grow in straight, and their mouth may not develop correctly.



Thumb sucking (left) and pacifier sucking (right) habits can cause problems as your child's teeth and mouth develop, like crooked teeth and changes to the shape of their face and mouth. Images © Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

First birthday, first dental visit

Your baby should have their first visit with the dentist after their first tooth appears, but no later than their first birthday. This first visit is a “well-baby checkup” for your child’s teeth. It’s best for your child to have a pleasant first meeting with the dentist. Don’t wait until an emergency comes up to introduce them to the dental office!

At this first visit, your dentist and team will:

- review your child’s health history
- do a complete oral exam to check growth and development, oral hygiene, and injuries, cavities, or other problems
- tell you if your child is at risk for tooth decay
- clean the teeth and show you how to properly clean your child’s teeth at home
- find out whether your child is getting the right amount of fluoride
- discuss teething, pacifier use, or finger/thumb sucking habits
- talk with you about common dental injuries and what to do if one happens
- discuss treatment if needed and schedule the next check-up

Children should stop using pacifiers by age 2 and should stop sucking their fingers or thumbs by age 4. If this does not happen on its own, here are a few tips to help them to stop:

- Instead of scolding your child for sucking, praise them for not sucking.
- Remember that children often suck their thumbs when feeling insecure or seeking comfort. Focus on helping them find other ways to feel relaxed and calm.
- Have your child’s dentist and pediatrician encourage your child to stop sucking.

Talk to your child’s dentist or pediatrician about other ways to discourage sucking.



Special Tips for Ages 6 to 12

Expect changes to your child's smile

Children begin to lose their front teeth around age 5 or 6. Between ages 6 and 12, they will usually have lost all 20 baby teeth. By the time they are 12 to 14 years old, most children have all of their adult teeth except their wisdom teeth.

The first adult tooth usually comes in between ages 6 and 7. Your child will have a mix of baby and adult teeth for a while. The smile might look a little uneven, with some big teeth, some small teeth, and even some missing teeth. Smiles even out once all the adult teeth are in place.



Holding space open for adult teeth

Sometimes a baby tooth is lost before the adult tooth below it is ready to come in. If a baby tooth is lost too early, nearby teeth can shift into the open space. When the adult tooth is ready to come into the space, there may not be enough room. The new tooth may be unable to come in. Or, it may come in crooked or in the wrong place.



If your child loses a tooth early, your dentist may recommend a space maintainer. This is a plastic or metal retainer that holds open the space left by the missing tooth. Your dentist will remove this retainer once the adult tooth begins to appear.



A space maintainer holds open space for an adult tooth.



Adult (Permanent) Teeth

| UPPER TEETH | | ERUPT |
|---|--|--------------|
|  Central incisor | | 7-8 yrs. |
| Lateral incisor | | 8-9 yrs. |
| Canine (cuspid) | | 11-12 yrs. |
| First premolar (first bicuspid) | | 10-11 yrs. |
| Second premolar (second bicuspid) | | 10-12 yrs. |
| First molar | | 6-7 yrs. |
| Second molar | | 12-13 yrs. |
| Third molar (wisdom tooth) | | 17-21 yrs. |
| LOWER TEETH | | ERUPT |
|  Third molar (wisdom tooth) | | 17-21 yrs. |
| Second molar | | 11-13 yrs. |
| First molar | | 6-7 yrs. |
| Second premolar (2nd bicuspid) | | 11-12 yrs. |
| First premolar (first bicuspid) | | 10-12 yrs. |
| Canine (cuspid) | | 9-10 yrs. |
| Lateral incisor | | 7-8 yrs. |
| Central incisor | | 6-7 yrs. |

This chart gives the names of adult teeth. It also shows when each tooth usually comes in. Not all children get the same teeth at the same times. Your child's teeth may come in earlier or later than shown here.

Protect teeth and prevent decay with sealants

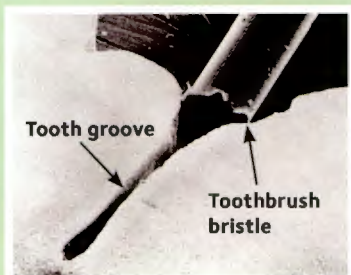
A **dental sealant** is a plastic material that is put on the chewing surfaces of the back teeth. The sealant material flows into the pits and grooves on those surfaces and acts like a barrier, protecting enamel by “sealing out” bacteria and bits of food.

Sealing a tooth is fast and painless. Sealants can last several years before they need to be reapplied. Ask your dentist if sealants will help your child.

How sealants help prevent decay



The chewing surfaces of a molar (magnified) have pits and grooves that trap plaque and bits of food.



Even a toothbrush bristle is too big to reach inside a groove in the tooth (magnified).

How sealants are applied



Tooth surface before a sealant is applied.



Tooth surface protected by a sealant.

Bad bites and crooked teeth

A bad bite is when the teeth are crowded, crooked, or out of line, or the jaws don't meet properly. A bad bite may be noticed as early as 2 years of age, but it is usually seen between the ages of 6 and 12, when the adult teeth are starting to come in.

What makes a bad bite bad?

- Crooked, crowded teeth may keep the jaws from developing evenly and properly.
- Some severe bad bites may cause trouble with eating and speaking.
- Crooked teeth can make it more difficult to keep teeth and gums clean, which can lead to tooth decay and gum disease.
- Teeth that are out of line can be worn down faster.
- A bad bite or crooked teeth may make children feel less confident about their looks.

Early treatment may help prevent a bad bite or make it less severe.

The dentist checks your child's bite at every visit, which is another reason why regular dental appointments for children are important. If treatment to correct a child's bite is needed, your dentist may refer your child to an **orthodontist**. This is a dentist who specializes in treating bite problems. Treatment to correct a bite usually begins when children are between 8 and 14 years old.

Examples of bad bites



This child has jaws that don't properly meet. If not treated, it can lead to problems with facial development. Image ©Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.



Crooked teeth make it harder to keep teeth clean and put them at a higher risk of developing tooth decay and gum disease.



Prevent dental injuries

Sport-related dental injuries can be prevented by wearing a mouthguard. Mouthguards help to cushion the damage to your child's mouth from a blow or heavy hit. Dental injuries such as broken teeth, jaw injuries, or cuts to the lip or tongue are reduced when a mouthguard is used.

Use of a mouthguard is usually thought of for contact sports, like boxing, football, hockey, and lacrosse. However, even in non-contact sports like gymnastics or skateboarding, mouthguard use can help prevent or lower mouth and jaw injuries.

Your dentist can make a custom mouthguard that fits your child's mouth. Treating a sports-related dental injury can cost thousands of dollars, so a custom-made mouthguard for your child is an excellent investment!

If you choose to buy a ready-made mouthguard, be sure to look for the **ADA Seal of Acceptance**. Mouthguards that have earned the ADA Seal were tested and found to meet ADA standards of safety and effectiveness. This means they can help protect your child's teeth and mouth from injury when used as directed.



Remember: The best mouthguard is one that fits properly and is worn regularly!



Prevention is the key to a healthy smile!

Don't wait to take your child to the dentist until pain or a dental emergency happens. Regular dental exams and professional cleanings can help your child have a lifetime of healthy smiles.

Read this information and keep it in a handy spot so you can quickly and calmly handle a dental emergency.

Knocked-out tooth — Go to the dentist right away. It's best for your child to see a dentist within 30 minutes. Don't forget to bring the tooth and any tooth pieces you can find!

Baby tooth (Primary) — It's normal for children to lose baby teeth, but an accident that damages a primary tooth could also harm the permanent tooth underneath it.

- If a tooth is completely out, **do not try to put it back into the tooth socket.**
- Bring your child and the tooth and/or any piece of the tooth with you to the dentist.

Adult tooth (Permanent) — Unlike a baby tooth that is knocked out, an adult tooth should be put back into its socket (if possible).

- Hold the tooth by the top and not by the root.
- If it looks dirty, rinse the root briefly with water. **Do not scrub the tooth or remove any attached bits of tissue.**
- Try to gently insert the tooth into its socket and then hold it there with a clean washcloth or gauze pad. If this isn't possible, try these other options in this order:
 1. See if your child can hold the tooth under their tongue or between the cheek and gums.
 2. Put the tooth in a container with milk, saliva, saline (salt) solution, or an emergency tooth preservation kit.
 3. If none of those liquids are available, put the tooth in water.

Broken or cracked tooth — Go to the dentist right away, and bring the broken tooth piece with you (if possible).

- Rinse the mouth with warm water to keep the area clean.
- If you can find the broken tooth piece, wrap it in some wet gauze or a wet towel.
- Put a cold compress (like an ice pack or a washcloth with ice wrapped inside) on the face to reduce swelling.

Bitten cheek, tongue or lip

- Clean the area gently with a cloth and place a cold compress over the area (if possible) to keep swelling down.
- If there is a lot of bleeding, or if it doesn't stop after 1-2 hours, take your child to their dentist or physician, or to an urgent care center.

Object caught between teeth

- Do **not** try to remove the object with a sharp or pointed instrument.
- Gently try to remove the object with dental floss.
- If floss doesn't work, take your child to their dentist.

Toothache or swollen face — Swelling of the face can be a sign of serious infection. If your child's face is swollen, take your child to their dentist or physician.

- Rinse the mouth with warm water to clean it out.
- Give your child what you would normally give them for pain, but **do not put aspirin directly on the aching tooth or gums.**

Possible broken jaw — Apply a cold compress to control swelling. Take your child to the dentist or an urgent care center right away.

In this booklet:

- Why it's important to take care of your own oral health before your baby arrives
- Dental care basics for your child
- Special tips for the growing ages: birth to 12
- Why baby teeth are important
- Tear-and-Save sheet on Handling Dental Emergencies

ADA Healthy Smile Tips

- Brush your teeth twice a day with a fluoride toothpaste.
- Clean between your teeth daily.
- Eat a healthy diet that limits sugary beverages and snacks.
- See your dentist regularly for prevention and treatment of oral disease.

For more information about taking care of your mouth and teeth, visit **MouthHealthy.org**, the ADA's website just for patients.



Initial decay photo courtesy of David M. Hassan, DMD

Sealant photos courtesy of Dr. Adam A. Francois

Malocclusion photo courtesy of Dr. Grant Bowbeer

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