

CENTRAL CONNECTICUT HEALTH DISTRICT

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Good Dental Health Starts Early

February conjures up images of heart shaped boxes full of chocolates and other sugary treats, so the designation as National Children's Dental Month is certainly timely. While it is okay to indulge on Valentine's Day, it is also a great time to remember the proper care of our children's teeth.

Dental caries, or tooth decay, is one of the most common chronic infectious diseases of childhood in this country. Although much of this problem is preventable, 17% of American children already have experienced tooth decay by age 4, even before they begin kindergarten. By the age of 8, over half of the children have had at least one cavity, and by age 17, that number increases to 78% of our young people. And the numbers are more staggering for children living in poverty, many of whom never get treatment. The result is that many children develop a number of problems such as unnecessary pain, difficulty talking, difficulty eating and swallowing, loss of self-esteem, and absenteeism from school. Left untreated, these problems only become magnified as the child enters adulthood.

So what can parents do to ensure dental health in their children? As soon as the first tooth erupts, parents can begin to protect their child's teeth and start a lifetime habit of good dental hygiene. When they are infants, parents should wipe their child's teeth with a moist washcloth. This should be done every day, until enough teeth are present to warrant using a small, soft toothbrush. Unless advised otherwise by a dentist, water is sufficient to clean the child's teeth until about the age of 2, when a small (pea-sized) amount of toothpaste can be added. Most children are not able to brush their own teeth well until about the age of 4 or 5; parents need to continue brushing their children's teeth twice each day until that time.

All children over the age of 6 months can benefit from fluoride. During the first couple of years, most children can get sufficient fluoride by drinking fluoridated water. It is recommended that commercially prepared baby formula be purchased in the powdered or concentrated form so it can be mixed with fluoridated tap water. Households using pre-mixed formula, private well water, or bottled water do not get the protection fluoridated drinking water provides.

Unless a dentist recommends using fluoride drops or supplements, it would be wise to avoid them. Too much fluoride can cause a condition known as fluorosis, a permanent discoloration of the enamel of the permanent teeth; it may appear as a brown stain, or white spots.

As we all know, avoiding sweet, sticky food and limiting eating between meals is a good idea to reduce the risk of tooth decay. However, not everyone is aware of a condition known as "bottle mouth," which occurs when baby's teeth stay in contact with milk or juice over a prolonged period of time. To avoid the cavities and pitting of teeth caused by this condition, babies should never be put to bed with a bottle of anything other than water. It is also wise not to allow the child to walk around with a bottle all day, and to teach him or her to drink from a cup as soon as they are physically able.

Another important aspect of good dental hygiene is regular visits to the dentist. The American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry recommends that the first visit to the dentist should occur when the first tooth comes in, or between 6 and 12 months of age. The American Academy of Pediatrics has changed its recommendation from 3 years of age to under 1 year, also whenever the first tooth erupts. In addition to examination, cleaning, and fluoride treatments, the dentist is apt to apply sealants to the back teeth to provide extra protection to hard to clean areas. Sealants are normally applied to the permanent molars, and some premolars, after the age of 6. And a visit to the dentist is also a good time for parents to discuss any persistent oral habits their children have developed, such as thumb-sucking, continued use of a pacifier, and grinding the teeth at night.

Good dental health is a lifetime process. It is never too early to begin taking care of one's teeth. To learn more about children's dental health, contact the American Dental Association at 312-440-2500 (www.ada.org), the American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry at 312-337-2169 (www.aapd.org), or the American Academy of Pediatrics at 847-434-4000 (www.aap.org). Additional information about this or other public health concerns is available at the Central Connecticut Health District at 860-721-2822 (www.ccthd.org.)