



THE MOUTHS OF BABES - DENTAL CARE NEEDS TO START BY AGE 1, WHICH MEANS MOM AND DAD NEED TO HELP

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What's the most prevalent infectious disease threatening our kids?

It's not asthma, cold or the flu. According to the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, it's tooth decay. More than half of children have experienced tooth decay, or caries, by the time they reach age 8.

And even though tooth decay may not be as visible as the flu, it can be just as debilitating.

"More children miss school due to toothaches and oral pain than any other reason," says Jeffrey N. Brownstein, a pediatric dentist in Litchfield Park.

The good news is that tooth decay is preventable, and parents are the key.

When parents practice good dental hygiene, they do more than set an example for their children. Dental health experts believe that tooth decay is infectious and transmitted to kids from their primary caregivers through the sharing of utensils and other day-to-day contact. Studies have shown that kids whose parents are free of tooth decay are more likely to remain decay-free, as well.

Because oral bacteria form at an early age, it's important to get kids to the dentist as soon as it's feasible. Experts say parents should make an appointment soon after the eruption of a child's first tooth and preferably by the time she turns a year old.

"At (age) 3, 4, 5, sometimes it's too late," says Richard Chaet, a Scottsdale-based pediatric dentist and a member of the American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry. "You can't prevent early caries at 3. At a year old, you can."

That first exam gives the dentist the chance to talk about proper hygiene and nutrition, and not just for the child. Chaet usually asks parents about their own dental health and how long it's been since they've seen a dentist.

"If (a mother) says, 'It's been years,' " he says, "I suggest she go."

Chaet sometimes goes as far as to prescribe a fluoride rinse for the parent or suggest that the parents chew gum containing xylitol, which reduces decay.

He also talks about the cause of decay, and how frequently the child is exposed to foods that cause it. It's not so much the amount of sugary liquids kids drink, he says, but how often they drink them.

Of course, few things are more important than establishing a good routine.

For children ages 1 to 3, it's recommend that parents sit knee to knee, with the child lying on their legs. One parent steadies the child, while the other brushes the youngster's teeth using plain water. Alternately, a single parent can brush while the child lies on a bed.

Fluoride toothpaste should not be used until the child is old enough to spit it out, around age 2 or 3. Kids younger than 6 should not use a fluoride rinse unless a doctor or dentist recommends it. Ingesting too much fluoride results in a condition called fluorosis, which can cause white or brown discolorations to form on the permanent teeth.

For kids age 3-7, some dentists recommend that parents first brush their children's teeth with plain water, and then allow them to brush by themselves with a minute smear of fluoride toothpaste. That way, the teeth get cleaned properly, and the kids share the responsibility.

By age 8, kids should be able to brush on their own, but parents should continue to check their kids' teeth after they've finished.

No matter what the age, it's important to make brushing fun.

"I provide my patients with a two-minute timer to help them brush for an adequate amount of time," Brownstein says. "This also helps to make the activity more like a game. Also, I have found that several brands of electric toothbrushes play a different song after brushing for an adequate amount of time. Younger children seem to become motivated, as they want to hear the music play."

Suzanne Sikora of Scottsdale makes brushing a family affair.

"It's kind of a silly thing," Sikora says. "Usually on weekends when we're all together, we say, 'OK, everybody, let's brush teeth,' and we all just brush. My son (Jimmy, age 3) loves to spit in the sink, so that's fun for him, too. We all just brush together and see who can brush the longest."

It's also important to turn brushing into a regular routine, completed at the same time every day, Brownstein says.

Anne Aberbach of Scottsdale keeps one set of toothbrushes upstairs and another downstairs to make it easier to brush after breakfast.

Her kids, Jordan Lee, 8, and Olivia Lee, 5, get to pick out their toothbrushes and toothpaste with such characters as Harry Potter or Dragon Tails.

"They each have their favorites," she says.

Brownstein says, "Most importantly, parents should never let a fussy child prevent them from brushing the child's teeth at least twice a day. Once a child realizes that a temper tantrum has kept them from this routine, all future times will become even more difficult."

Lynn Julian of Phoenix says sometimes her kids, Joey, 5, and Rose, 3, don't want to brush.

"I just say it's not a choice," she says. "You want your teeth to be strong, or you won't be able to eat all those yummy things you like to eat."

Sikora says the most difficult thing is reminding her kids to do it.

But "they're pretty good about it," she says. "They know it's part of a regular day."

Surgeon General backs fluoride in water

A report from the Surgeon General calls community water fluoridation "the most cost-effective, practical and safe means for reducing and controlling the occurrence of tooth decay in a community." And while more Valley communities have begun adding fluoride to their water, several still do not.

Kids living in communities that have low fluoride levels and who are also at risk of tooth decay might benefit from fluoride supplements, says Dr. Gerald A. Caniglia, chief dental officer for the Arizona Department of Health Services.

But with fluoride in everything from baby food to canned vegetables and soft drinks, dental professionals also are concerned about kids getting too much.

"It sounds like a cop-out," says pediatrician Robert F. Beauchamp of United Healthcare, "but this is one of those areas where you really do need to say 'consult your doctor.' "

Cities that add fluoride to their water include Tempe, Glendale, Phoenix, Chandler, Mesa, El Mirage, Peoria and Gilbert.

Questions about your water supply? The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention keep track of which water companies fluoridate. Get a copy of your water bill to get the name of your utility, then visit www.cdc.gov/oralhealth/factsheets/index.htm. Click on "data systems," then "my water's fluoride."

-- Kathy Montgomery

Saving that tooth

If you have a tooth knocked out while playing sports or because of an accident, you may be able to save it.

If the tooth is knocked out of its socket, but not broken, it's possible that a dentist or doctor can reimplant the tooth if you act quickly, says an article in the January issue of the Mayo Clinic Health Letter.

Here's what you can do to increase the chances of successful tooth reimplantation:

- * Don't touch the root of the tooth. You may damage the ligament.
- * Remove dirt and debris by rinsing the tooth in a container of clean water. Don't rub or scrape the tooth.
- * Try to replace the tooth in its socket and bite down gently on gauze or a moistened tea bag to help keep it in place. If you can't replace the tooth in its socket, put it in milk, your own saliva, warm salt water or between your gum and cheek.
- * Head straight for the dentist or emergency room. There's a better chance of successful reimplantation if the tooth is back in its socket within 30 minutes.

Even if the tooth is successfully reimplanted, tissue inside the tooth eventually dies. A root canal will be necessary to keep the tooth functioning properly.

Gannett News Service

Reach the reporter at (602)444-8671.

12-month health planner

Take control of your health one step at a time. In our 12 month family health planner, we offer you information, tips and advice for leading a healthier happier life. This month, we mark National Children's Dental Health month, and invite you to take stock of you kids' teeth. Miss last month's New Year's resolution solution? Check it out, along with our complete 12-month health planner at health.azcentral.com

January: Keep your resolution to lose weight.

February: February is National Children's Dental Health Month. The surgeon general recommends protecting children's teeth with fluoride, yet, according to a national survey, nearly one-third of parents do not consider it essential to their children's oral hygiene. It's an important issue in the Valley, because not all cities fluoridate their water. Parents of young children should ask their pediatricians about fluoride supplements.

March: Save your skin.

April: Get control over your allergies.

May: Drink up.