

BABY'S FIRST VISIT TO THE DENTIST

By Lauren Atmore



Why including the family dentist in your list of health care professionals is a must for your baby

The life of a baby is full of firsts, from their first smile to the first time they walk on their own. It's also a time of learning for parents, who are relying on professional advice as their baby moves through the stages of development. According to the Ontario Dental Association, baby's first visit to the dentist should occur by the age of one year, or when the first teeth appear, ensuring their first teeth will be healthy as they continue through their milestones.¹

Why do babies need to see a dentist?

Some people may wonder why dentists recommend that babies have their first appointment when they're so young. More than half of a child's 20 baby teeth will have grown in by the time they're 18 months old, so seeing a dentist in the baby's first year is important.

"This first checkup is a preventive appointment," says Dr. Elliott A. Schwartz, a pediatric dentist with Toronto Children's Dentist, adding that this is where "prevention of future dental problems can be addressed."

Not only can a dentist help keep these first teeth safe and healthy, but early visits can also help children start learning what dental appointments are like, which may help them feel more comfortable in the dental chair as they get older.

Babies should start visiting the dentist to avoid major health issues

Dr. Schwartz says that putting off this first appointment until the child is three to five years old may lead to severe early caries syndrome. This condition, also known as nursing caries, baby bottle syndrome or baby tooth rot, describes severe cavities in a child's first teeth. Left untreated, severe early cavities can cause pain, infection and may even damage the underlying adult tooth.²

Hospital outpatient dental surgery for early childhood cavities is the leading cause of day surgery for children between the ages of one and five years old, representing 31 per cent of all day surgery for children, according to the Canadian Institute for Health Information.³



Permanent teeth and preventive care

"Many parents have the misunderstanding that these are just baby teeth and they are going to be lost, so why worry about them," says Dr. Schwartz. But baby teeth play many important roles in a child's development.

A child's back molars hold space for their adult molars to "come into the mouth in a straight, functional pattern," he says, all the while performing a lot of the child's chewing function. Our front teeth are instrumental in our pronunciation of words, and a child losing their baby incisors too early "could impair the child's ability to correctly pronounce 's,' 't' and 'v' sounds," warns Dr. Schwartz. He also mentions that a young child may become self-conscious or "reluctant to laugh or smile in public" from continually being asked, "What happened to your teeth?"

Extending past just oral health, the Canadian Dental Association (CDA) notes that "children with severe early childhood caries are more likely to be anemic, iron deficient and vitamin D deficient."⁴

What parents should know about the first visit

The good news is that while early childhood cavities can be scary, a child's first visit doesn't have to be. "The dentist should not find any problems in your baby's mouth at this age," says Dr. Schwartz. The focus of a first visit will be on diet and feeding habits, teething and establishing a daily oral health routine, he says. And since the emphasis of a baby's first visit is prevention of oral health issues, no preparation is required on the part of the parents.



The importance of fluoride

The CDA considers fluoridation essential to a child's oral health, stating that "community water fluoridation is an important investment for all age groups, particularly children."⁵ For children under three years of age with an increased risk of developing early childhood cavities, parents are recommended to "use a grain of rice-sized amount of fluoridated toothpaste to brush their child's teeth," while parents with children who are not at an increased risk can brush their child's teeth using a toothbrush moistened with water.⁶



Nutrition is tied to overall oral health

Adults and children alike are susceptible to a host of oral health conditions that can stem from their diet and oral hygiene practices. According to Dr. Schwartz, "water and milk are appropriate drinks" for infants, while "juice should be avoided for as long as possible." The College of Dental Surgeons of Alberta says that "at night, only put water in the bottle."⁷

Good oral health for life

Above all else, Dr. Schwartz emphasizes that it's never too late to start prioritizing your child's oral health. "Cavities are like rust: once started, there is nothing you can do to stop them, other than repair," he says. "Delay only increases the costs of repair and likely pain to your child."

The preventive nature of a baby's first visit not only helps to keep oral health issues at bay, but also allows the child to grow up knowing that visiting the dentist is an important part of their overall health and well-being. 📷

References available on page 36.

How to Help Your Baby During Teething

It can be hard to see your baby frustrated and in pain as their first teeth come in. Here are a few tips to safely help your baby with teething⁸:

- Massage their gums with your clean finger or a clean, chilled wet cloth.
- Avoid giving them hard foods like raw carrots that could cause choking.
- Avoid giving them teething biscuits. Sugar will remain on the new teeth, leading to decay.
- Over-the-counter gels for teething should not be used, unless advised by a doctor.
- Your dentist, pharmacist or doctor can suggest an over-the-counter medicine to ease the pain.
- Getting new teeth does not make babies sick or give them a fever. If your child has a fever, check with your doctor.
- A child should rinse or drink water after taking any medication, as it is usually sweetened for taste.⁹

