

# Fact Sheets for Families

## Dental Caries

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Dental caries (tooth decay) is one of the most common diseases of childhood. It is an infectious disease, caused by bacteria (germs), but many factors are involved in the process.

### How is tooth decay formed?

Tooth decay is a spot on a tooth where minerals have melted away and a hole has formed. This process, called demineralization, is caused by acids that are created by certain types of bacteria living in our mouths.

### Factors that can affect your child's risk for developing tooth decay

#### Family history of caries

- *History of previous caries, cavities or fillings* in children under the age of 5 places a child at high risk for future decay.
- *Areas of demineralization, bleeding gums or visible plaque on teeth* means bacteria that can cause cavities or infection of the gums are not being removed regularly.
- *Mother and family members with cavities* means that dietary practices or preventive habits need to be improved.

#### Weaning and other dietary habits

- *Feeding bottles containing something other than milk or water* (e.g., soda, juices) increase your child's risk for tooth decay.
- *High frequency of sugar containing foods* (candy, sugary foods, beverages with sugar), can increase acid production and contribute to mineral loss and tooth decay.

#### Oral hygiene and adequate fluoride

- *Poor oral hygiene* helps build up of acid producing bacteria as plaque in your child's mouth.

- *Helping your child to brush* their own teeth will ensure proper removal of plaque and development of healthy habits.
- *Fluoride toothpaste* can help prevent tooth decay by reducing the loss of minerals and reversing the demineralization process at the early stages of decay.
- *Drinking water that contains proper amount of fluoride* is an easy, safe and effective way to reduce tooth decay.

#### Special health care needs

- *Special health care needs or disabilities and medical conditions* may make it difficult for some children and their caretakers to clean their child's teeth.
- *Medicines that produce a "dry mouth" or contain high levels of sugar* put these children at higher risk for tooth decay.
- *Braces, retainers or other orthodontic appliances* often trap plaque and make it difficult to remove acid-producing bacteria.

#### Dental home and access to dental/health care

- *Regular dental check-ups* can help find decay in its early stages.
- *Fluoride treatments* by health professionals can provide protection against cavities and help repair of damaged teeth.
- *Dental sealants* are usually placed on the biting surfaces of the "back teeth" to keep plaque out and help prevent decay.
- *Caries removal/treatment* can help keep oral health in best possible condition.
- *Poverty, social deprivation and low education of parents* are examples of circumstances that may indicate barriers to accessing dental care and increased caries risk.

It is important to make sure your child's teeth stay healthy. visit [www.ucsfchildcarehealth.org](http://www.ucsfchildcarehealth.org) or call the Healthline at (800) 333-3212.

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#### References and Resources:

American Academy of Pediatrics Policy statement, Oral Health Risk Assessment Timing and Establishment of the Dental Home. PEDI-ATRICS Vol. 111 No. 5 May 2003, pp. 1113-1116. Online at <http://aappolicy.aappublications.org/cgi/reprint/pediatrics;111/5/1113.pdf>

California First Smile online at <http://first5oralhealth.org>



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For more information, please contact:

Healthline 1-800-333-3212

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