

Fact Sheets for Families

Dental Caries

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.

References and Resources:

American Academy of Pediatrics Policy statement, Maintaining and Improving the Oral Health of Young Children. PEDIATRICS Vol. 134 No. 6 December 2014, pp. 1224-1229.

UCSF California Childcare Health Program, Promoting Children's Oral Health (2007) <https://cchp.ucsf.edu/content/health-safety-child-care-setting-promoting-childrens-oral-health>



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