

Access to Baby and Child Dentistry (ABCD)

A mom said to me once, ‘Someone told me that baby teeth don’t have nerves, so I thought that my son’s baby teeth didn’t matter.’ He was around two years old when the mom took her son in to the dentist for the first time. By that time, he had been complaining of mouth pain and needed to have general anesthesia to treat his tooth decay. Not all dentists offer general anesthesia for children, and it is especially risky for young children to undergo the procedure. The underlying infections that led to dental decay, if left untreated, could become abscessed and spread to the body. This kind of systemic infection is also known as sepsis and it can be fatal.

I was glad this mom got the help she needed for her son. She had been concerned about his behavior, saying he was acting out and it was difficult to get him to sit down to eat. I never found out for certain, but it’s possible that his mouth pain was the source of his behavior issues. As parents and caregivers we can’t know everything, but we do the best we can with what we know. I hope that by understanding why infant and toddler teeth matter and knowing how to care for them, we can prevent cavities, which can be painful, costly, and time-consuming for families when treatment is delayed.

Children begin [losing their baby teeth around age 6](#). Their last baby teeth may not fall out until about age 12! Baby teeth are also known as [primary teeth, which play a big role in a child’s development](#). Primary teeth help children smile, eat, talk, and hold space for adult teeth. Decayed primary teeth become soft and can lead to overcrowded teeth, so when adult teeth come in they tend to also be overcrowded and prone to decay. Parents could even save money on braces if they prevent cavities in their children’s primary teeth. You can think of baby teeth as primary, because they are so important!

Most of us know that brushing teeth twice a day is a good habit to prevent cavities, but did you know that premature infants are at higher risk for cavities? This is because quality or quantity of their enamel may be reduced. So, there’s even more reason to take extra care of children’s teeth!

6 habits for a bright smile:

1. Drink water for thirst
2. Eat the rainbow in fruits and vegetables
3. Give your teeth a rest – wait about 2-hours between meals and snacks to help your teeth recover
4. Avoid grazing on starchy, sugary snacks and drinks
5. Go to the dentist every 6 months – baby’s first visit should be by first tooth or first birthday

6. Check your child's teeth – lift the lip and check for decay once a month. If you see white or brown spots call the dentist right away

Tips on tooth brushing:

- Use a light smear of fluoridated toothpaste starting with tooth eruption (6 to 10 months of age) to age 3 years. Use a pea size amount after that.
- Brush all sides of teeth; do not rinse after brushing
- Begin flossing when child's teeth touch
- When you can't brush, rinse your mouth with tap water (fluoridated) after eating. Children can usually rinse their mouth at age 3 years.
- A caregiver should help a child with brushing until they can tie a shoe lace, between 6 to 8 years old.

Need help finding a dentist?

- For children 0 through 5 years old on Medicaid/Apple Health, contact me, your [Access to Baby and Child Dentistry \(ABCD\) Program Coordinator](#) (call 425-339-5219 or email Dentalinfo@snohd.org). The ABCD Coordinator can provide personalized service in accessing a dentist in your area.
- For anyone with a primary care provider at [Sea Mar](#) or [Community Health Centers](#), their systems also provide dental care. You may like the convenience of scheduling with their dentists.
- For anyone in WA, you can contact [Dentist Link](#). Their referral specialists can connect you to a dentist in your area that fits your needs – Apple Health, private insurance, or no insurance.

Want advice on oral health activities for your child care? You can contact Katy Lavenhagen the Nutrition Consultant on the Child Care Health Outreach Team or you can contact me, the ABCD Coordinator. I can be reached via email at dentalinfo@snohd.org or via telephone at 425-339-5219. ***Felicia Cain, MSN, RN*** – Public Health Nurse