

# Feeding Practices

## Diet / Early Childhood Caries

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**T**he first 1000 days of life, between conception and baby's second birthday is considered the most important time in shaping their development. Your baby needs nutritious food and healthy eating habits. Brushing their teeth is important for oral health, but a balanced/low sugar diet is equally important.

Strong baby teeth are a great start to your baby's overall health. They help your child to chew, talk and smile, some can even last up to the age of ten, so it is important

to look after them. Caring for their teeth will help them have a healthy mouth and help prevent tooth decay.

Did you know that tooth decay is the most common chronic disease affecting children, and that it is about five times more common than asthma? It may also be a surprise to you that your child is at risk of tooth decay as soon as their first tooth appears! Tooth decay is diet-related and is caused by sugar reacting with bacteria in plaque (the sticky film on your teeth) to produce acid which damages the tooth.

Early Childhood Caries (ECC) refers to tooth decay in children under the age of six, it is also known as 'Baby Bottle Tooth Decay' or 'Nursing Bottle Caries'.

No one wants their child at risk of pain, infection (abscess), and tooth loss because of tooth decay. It is important to know that it may affect their quality of life, nutrition, growth, school life and socialising, or cause a higher risk of decay in their adult teeth. Advanced ECC if left untreated may require hospitalisation and surgery under general anaesthetic.



The important and reassuring thing to be aware of is that tooth decay is preventable.

### Here is what you need to know.

- Eating a lot of sweet snacks and drinks will put your child at more risk of getting tooth decay. Many processed foods are high in hidden sugars e.g., pasta sauce, tomato ketchup and yoghurt. Things like breakfast bars and some breakfast cereals have a lot of sugar so check food labels. Less than five grams sugar per 100 grams is low sugar. To give you an idea how much this is, one teaspoon of sugar is about four grams. The World Health Organization recommends adults and children reduce their daily intake of free sugars to less than roughly 25 grams (six teaspoons) per day to reduce the risk of unhealthy weight gain and tooth decay. Free sugars include glucose, fructose or table sugar which are added to foods and drinks by the manufacturer, cook or consumer, and also include sugars naturally present in honey, syrups, fruit juices and fruit juice concentrates. You can see that it is so easy for sugar to add up during the day.
- Giving your baby/toddler fruit juices or sugar-sweetened drinks in their feeding bottles, especially in bed, leads to severe and rapid baby bottle/nursing decay. A similar problem can arise from giving a baby a soother dipped in honey or sugar.
- Toddlers need good nutrition for healthy bodies, teeth and for brain development. Parents and carers play an important role in teaching them

healthy eating habits. Having family meals is a great way to introduce and encourage nutritious foods. When your baby starts on solid food, begin to wean off the bottle and encourage drinking from a sippy cup (around six months).

- Give them healthy snacks such as wholemeal crackers, natural yoghurt, and cheese. Small sized fruit and veg such as grapes, berries and cherry tomatoes should be cut into quarters as safe size pieces to prevent a choking hazard.
- Children are not born with a sweet tooth, but sweet snacks can lead them to develop a 'sweet tooth' and may cause them to refuse healthier foods. It is recommended to limit sweet treats to once or twice a week and avoid sticky and chewy sweets or bars which stay longer on the teeth. The Dental Health Foundation advises that giving sweet treats or drinks to your child just before bedtime or during the night is a very damaging time for the teeth and should be avoided. It is best to have such treats at mealtime and to rinse the mouth with water afterward to wash away the sugar. The more times you have sugar the greater the risk. Even dried fruits like raisins and honey are high in naturally occurring sugar and can stick to baby teeth.
- Tap water contains fluoride which acts as a repair kit for teeth by helping to strengthen them. Plain water and milk are the best drinks for children aged over 12 months.
- It is best to let your baby sleep without a bottle in its mouth. Even milk can cause tooth decay. Finish feeding

before putting the baby to bed. Milk is an important part of baby's diet and breast feeding is good for baby teeth. After feeding with breast milk/formula and before bed, wipe their gums and brush their teeth twice a day with a soft brush and water, once the first tooth appears. Remember that low fat milk is not suitable for under twos and skimmed milk is not suitable for under-fives.

- Once your child is two years of age use a pea sized amount of fluoride toothpaste (at least 1000ppm) spitting it out and not rinsing after brushing to reduce the damage of any sugar eaten during the day.
- Help your child with brushing twice a day to help prevent tooth decay – at night before bed and in the morning for two to three minutes. Do not use toothpaste for children aged under two, unless advised by your dentist. Younger children will need you to brush their teeth correctly and to supervise them to avoid swallowing toothpaste, until about seven years of age. Help and show them how to spit it out after brushing, don't rinse with water as this only washes the fluoride off the teeth. Replace toothbrushes about every three months, or sooner if the bristles are worn. A worn toothbrush won't do a good job of cleaning the teeth.

Prevention is better than cure, so visit your dentist by baby's first birthday. Your adult child will thank you that you looked after their teeth.

**Empower yourself with a little help from a friend – the Dental Health Foundation [www.dentalhealth.ie](http://www.dentalhealth.ie) where you will find lots more oral health tips for healthy baby teeth!**



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