# HEALTHY LIFE!

**How you take care of your mouth effects your overall health.** This guide includes tips on nutrition, as well as oral care for the entire family from infants to seniors and a special section on caring for NICU babies. Follow these tips for a lifetime of good oral health.

Choosing healthy food and drinks is one of the best ways to have a healthy mouth.

**Small changes can make a big difference!**

**Make one of these easy changes to boost nutrition and save your smile:**

Replace sugary cereal with whole grain oats.

Add a veggie to every meal. Choose fruit for snack.

Always brush after having sugary drinks and juice.

America's ToothFairy is working to improve the oral health of familes with the financial support of GC America. We help support service delivery, educate caregivers, and reinforce the importance of oral health for the entire family and across the United States.

**Learn more at AmericasToothFairy.org.**

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# BABIES

**Your oral health begins developing before you are even born. Follow these tips to get started right!**

## less than 1 year

**When you keep your mouth healthy your baby will be healthier too.**

- Visit your dentist while you are pregnant. Caregivers can pass along germs that may cause cavities.
- Avoid passing germs that may infect your baby's teeth when they come in. Wash pacifiers in warm, soapy water–not with your mouth.
- Take your baby to the dentist when the first tooth appears or before their first birthday.
- Avoid putting your baby to bed with a bottle or sippy cup containing anything but water.

## feeding time

**Before:** Wash your hands, baby's hands, and bottles.

**After:** Clean mouth, cheeks and hands with a soft cloth and water.

Once baby's first tooth erupts, use a small, soft toothbrush with a smear of fluoride toothpaste.

# TODDLERS

**Follow these tips to help children develop healthy habits to last throughout their life.**

## 1 to 5 years

**Demonstrate healthy oral habits–brush and floss together every day.**

- Brush your child's teeth two times each day, especially before bedtime. Use a smear of fluoride toothpaste for children under age 2 and a pea-sized amount for children older than 2 years.
- Visit the dentist for a check up every six months.
- Prevent dental injuries by playing on playgrounds surrounded by a soft surface such as sand, mulch or rubber mats.
- Instead of sugar-sweetened drinks or juice, give your child water.
- Avoid starchy, sticky or sugary snacks.

# KIDS & TEENS

**Keep up with regular dental visits! Guide older kids to make healthy food choices to carry through adulthood.**

6 to 18 years

**Introduce new oral health skills like daily flossing and use of fluoride rinse.**

- Post a calendar in the bathroom and reward kids with a gold star for each day of great oral care!
- Replace toothbrushes every three months and after every illness to avoid bacteria and germs.
- Clean orthodontic appliances daily using a denture-cleansing bath. Rinse well.
- Prevent dental injuries while playing sports by wearing a mouthguard.
- Drink water instead of sugary drinks and juice.

# ADULTS

**As teeth age extra precautions should be taken to avoid decay and tooth loss. Regular dental visits are essential!**

middle-age to seniors

**Aging teeth and gums need extra gentle care to avoid erosion and recession.**

- Try an electric toothbrush with soft bristles for gentle cleaning.
- Arthritis can complicate flossing. Try pre-threaded flossers, tiny brushes or water flossers.
- Medications can cause dry mouth, increasing risk of decay. Ask your dentist about treatment.
- Stay hydrated by drinking water daily instead of sugary drinks and juice.

# HEALTHY MOM & BABY

## Healthy Tips for NICU Babies and Moms

**When you keep your mouth healthy your baby will be healthier too.** You can pass germs to your baby's mouth that may cause cavities when your baby's teeth come in.

**Follow these tips to protect your baby's sweet smile!**

- Brush your teeth two times every day.
- Visit a dentist while pregnant to keep your mouth healthy.
- Floss between your teeth every day.
- Keep seeing your dentist for a check up every six months.

# Healthy BABY

## Before feeding:

- Wash your hands and baby's hands
- Wash bottles and feeding tubes

## After feeding:

- Clean your baby with a soft cloth and warm water

**Even if your baby is tube feeding, wipe baby's mouth at least 2 times a day**

Take your baby to the dentist before their first birthday.

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# What is a Dental Screening?

Dental screenings are an essential first step to ensure your child grows up with a healthy smile. They are an important step in preventing tooth decay and are often provided free of charge!

A dental screening is performed by a dentist, dental hygienist, or other healthcare professional. Your child's mouth will be checked for any problems with their teeth and gums. By finding issues early, dental screenings prevent costly treatment and the pain caused by cavities.

## A Dental Screening Can Find:

1. **Untreated decay.** If caught early, some cavities can be treated without a drill and can save you money compared to treating advanced decay.

2. **Dental abscesses.** These infections form under the gums. They can be painful and can be very dangerous if left untreated.

3. **Poor dental hygiene habits.** If your child doesn't brush and floss well, plaque and leftover food can build up. They will be taught the proper way to care for their teeth and gums if necessary.

4. **Teeth development problems.** Sometimes, teeth don't grow in the way they should. By catching these issues early, they can be easier and less expensive to treat.

## What happens if they find something?

You will be informed of any areas of concern and connected to a dental care provider to address the issue. Your child will learn how to take care of their teeth to prevent future issues and may also receive a free toothbrush, if available!

**In short, a dental screening helps your child grow up with a healthy smile!**

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AMERICA'S TOOTHFAIRY

**Protect your child's smile!**
Cavities are preventable: a message from America's ToothFairy

# Does My Child Need Fluoride Treatment?

## Many parents believe the myth that baby teeth aren't important. Don't be one of them!

In order for your child's mouth and speech to develop properly, primary teeth need to last from six to ten years, depending on the tooth. A cavity at age three or four should be treated right away, but the best plan is to prevent tooth decay from the start!

## Why bother? Here are 7 reasons to prevent and treat tooth decay immediately:

### *1. Treating tooth decay gets more expensive the longer you wait.*

A small cavity is cheaper to treat, usually between $150 to $300 depending on where you live. If the cavity reaches the pulp and root before the tooth is ready to be shed, treatment can cost from $600 to $1,400 plus the cost of a crown, which usually run around $1,000 and are NOT covered by most state-funded dental plans.

### *2. Tooth decay hurts. A lot.*

Once the cavity reaches the inner nerve of the tooth the pain can be excruciating, making it hard for your child to sleep, eat and concentrate at school—if they make it to school at all.

### *3. The early loss of teeth affects speech development.*

Some parents believe that a cheaper option may be to simply have the decaying tooth pulled instead of filled. But losing teeth—especially the front upper or lower teeth—before the age of three can cause speech impairment that can last into later years.

### *4. Missing teeth may lead to costly orthodontic treatment later on.*

Another function of baby teeth is to hold space for the permanent teeth that will eventually replace them. Whether the tooth is lost to decay or extraction, early loss can cause adult teeth to come in crooked and need expensive orthodontic treatment. Crooked teeth can also cause pain, speech problems and are more difficult to clean.

### *5. Untreated tooth decay leads to bone loss and a lifetime of dental expenses.*

When a baby tooth is left untreated, the cavity can spread to the adult tooth beneath it or to the bone that holds the tooth in place, causing irreversible damage.

### *6. Infection from cavities can spread to other parts of the body.*

Tooth decay is caused by an infection. The bacteria that cause tooth decay can infect the bloodstream and have been linked to other diseases including heart disease, diabetes, stroke and some forms of cancer. In some cases the

infection can even spread to the brain. Although cases like this are rare, these types of infections send 61,000 people to the hospital each year and can be deadly.

***7. Ignoring cavities teaches kids that having them is normal when they're not.***

Although cavities are common, they are not normal, and they are easy to prevent. When parents believe the myth that cavities in baby teeth aren't important, their kids grow up believing it too. Adults with poor oral health often struggle with other health complications and limited job prospects.

**Want more great oral health tips and resources?**
Get a smile in your inbox! Sign up for one of our fun and informative, quarterly newsletters at AmericasToothFairy.org.

*The good news is, healthy dental hygiene habits and preventive dental treatments like fluoride varnish can help your child grow up with a healthy smile!*

# What is fluoride varnish?

**Fluoride is a natural mineral contained in soil and water.**

In some areas of the country where fluoride levels are low, it is added to drinking water because it has been shown to prevent cavities. You probably already have oral care products such as toothpaste and mouth rinse that also contain fluoride.

Fluoride works by strengthening the tooth's hard outer surface called enamel. Tooth enamel is the strongest substance in you body–even stronger than your bones! However, tooth enamel can wear away and be dissolved by the acids in some foods, drinks, and by the harmful bacteria that live in the mouth and cause cavities.

Even if you have fluoride in your drinking water and toothpaste, it's generally a good idea to have your dental care provider apply fluoride varnish or gel to your child's teeth. This treatment adheres to teeth for several hours and has many benefits including:

- Strengthening weakened tooth enamel
- Slowing the loss of minerals from teeth
- Preventing the growth of the microbes that cause cavities
- Treating tooth decay during its early stages

**The bottom line:**

Fluoride is a safe, low-cost, and effective way to prevent tooth decay across your child's lifespan. *Ask your dental care provider if your child needs fluoride varnish.*

America's ToothFairy

As a resource provider, America's ToothFairy increases access to oral health care by supporting nonprofit clinics and community partners delivering education, prevention and treatment services for underserved children. We work to ensure all children can access dental care and learn about oral health. Learn more at AmericasToothFairy.org. Copyright 2024.

# What Happens When You Don't Brush or Floss?

Brushing and flossing are needed to keep your mouth and body healthy!

When you do not brush or floss your teeth, a number of bad things can happen. They can be bad for both your mouth and your body. Always brush your teeth for two minutes twice a day, and floss between your teeth every day.

If you do not take care of your teeth these bad things can happen:

**Bad breath.** Food that collects on your teeth, gums, and tongue can cause a gross odor and taste in your mouth. That food also feeds the bacteria that live in your mouth that also smell bad.

**Gunk buildup.** Plaque is a sticky layer of bacteria that is always growing on your teeth. When you don't brush it away it can cause a lot of oral health issues including gum disease and cavities. Plaque hardens into tartar, which can only be cleaned off by a dental professional.

**Cavities.** Cavities are brown or black holes that form when bacteria eat leftover food and sugar in your mouth. These bacteria ooze acid that eats away at your teeth until it reaches the nerve. If left untreated, cavities can lead to pain, infections, and tooth loss.

**Gum disease.** When plaque builds up around and under your gums, they will become puffy, painful, and bloody. Gum disease does not heal on its own. It will continue to get worse, leading to loose teeth that eventually fall out.

(This is different from when your baby teeth get wiggly because they are replaced by adult teeth.)

**Infection.** When you do not brush and floss, the bacteria that cause cavities and gum disease can can spread sickness to other parts of your body like your heart, lungs and brain!

**The American Dental Association says you should brush your teeth twice a day for two minutes, floss once a day, and visit the dentist twice a year.**

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AMERICA'S TOOTHFAIRY

# Facts About Tooth Decay

Tooth decay is the #1 chronic childhood illness in America.
It can lead to health consequences that extend beyond the dental chair.

## Did you know?

1 in 5 U.S. children go without dental care.

More than 40% of children have cavities by the time they reach kindergarten.

Emergency department care for dental complaints cost up to $1.6 billion in 2012.

Children with poor oral health are three times more likely to miss school as a result of dental pain.

Dental care is the most prevalent unmet health care need for special needs kids.

Left untreated, severe tooth decay can lead to malnourishment, anemia, emergency surgery, life-threatening secondary infections and death. Seriously impacting self-esteem, employment prospects, social development and overall quality of life, untreated tooth decay and gum disease also have a direct correlation to heart disease, stroke, pulmonary disease and pre-term, low birth-weight babies.

With limited or no access to oral health care, children from impoverished families and some minority groups have a much higher rate of tooth decay. These children are at significant risk for impaired cognitive and social development, educational disparities and a lifetime of shame associated with dental disease.

While the Affordable Care Act expands dental benefit coverage for children, it does not address critical access to care issues caused by the loss of school-based dental education programs, state budget cuts, low reimbursement rates that prevent providers from accepting Medicaid patients, health professional shortage areas, and the overall lack of Medicaid dollars going toward dental care.

Lack of access to pediatric dental care creates a set of health disparities that impede wellness throughout adulthood. As a result, a significant burden is placed on local communities, growing poverty, negatively impacting long-term health, decreasing workforce productivity and draining personal and governmental financial resources.

## Tooth decay is preventable!

America's ToothFairy was formed to provide an aggressive collaborative response to eliminate children's preventable suffering from pediatric dental disease. Our extensive community-based network includes dental and health professionals, generous corporations, nonprofit health programs, civic and youth organizations, and caring individuals in every state.

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