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Frequently Asked Questions

Why are baby teeth important to treat? Won't they just fall out anyway?

Healthy primary or 'baby' teeth are essential to maintain overall good health. Neglected cavities can lead to problems that affect the development of the permanent teeth. Primary teeth play several important roles: they are needed for proper chewing and eating, they act as placeholders for the permanent teeth and guide them into the correct position, they permit normal development of the jawbones and muscles. Primary teeth also take part in the development of speech. While the front 4 teeth last until 6-7 years of age, the back teeth aren't replaced until age 10-13.

What's the difference between a pediatric dentist and a regular dentist?

Pediatric dentists are the pediatricians of dentistry. A pediatric dentist has 2 to 3 years of specialty training following completion of dental school and limits their practice to treating children only. Pediatric dentists are both primary and oral care providers for infants through adolescence, including special needs patients.

When should I take my child to their first dental appointment?

They should see a pediatric dentist by the time their first tooth appears but no later than their first birthday. An ounce of prevention is worth a pound in treatment. This creates a 'dental home' similar to their pediatrician.

How often should my child see a pediatric dentist?

A routine check-up is recommended every 6 months. This is to prevent cavities and other dental problems before they occur. However, your pediatric dentist may tell you when and how often your child should be seen based on their personal oral health.

Are thumbsucking and/or pacifier habits bad for my child's teeth?

Thumb and pacifier sucking habits can be harmful to your child's teeth. It can cause an unwanted growth pattern that can be difficult to correct. Pacifier use should cease when a child stops nursing or bottle-feeding. Usually a child will stop the habit on their own when they're ready. Occasionally a child will continue the habit beyond when it is appropriate. At this point you should address this with your pediatric dentist to discuss possible intervention.

What should I use to clean my baby's teeth?

From birth, clean the gums with a warm cloth after feeding. As teeth begin to erupt, use an age appropriate sized toothbrush to remove plaque bacteria that can cause decay. Tooth brushing should be done 2 times a day preferably in the morning and immediately before going to bed. The child should have nothing to eat or drink (except water) following the evening brushing.

When should I start using toothpaste and how much?

Toothpaste can be used at any age. It helps make brushing more pleasant. Use a 'smear' of toothpaste to brush for children under 2 years old. For the 2-5 year old, use a pea-sized amount of fluorinated toothpaste and perform or assist in your child's tooth brushing. They should spit out and not swallow excess toothpaste after brushing.

How do I know if my child is getting enough fluoride?

Your child's primary source of fluoride is in the drinking water. If the child is not getting enough fluoride through the water (i.e. if you're using bottled water) then your pediatric dentist can prescribe fluoride supplements.

What are the diet guidelines to help prevent cavities?

Moderation is key to life. This expression is appropriate for your child's diet to help prevent cavities. Their diet should be balanced with fruits, vegetables, grains, dairy, meat and eggs. Limiting the servings of sugars and starches will also aid in protecting your child's teeth from decay. Your pediatric dentist can review your child's diet to help select the correct foods that protect your child's teeth.

What are dental sealants and how do they work?

Dental sealants prevent cavities! They are applied to the chewing surfaces of teeth. These surfaces have grooves that are deep and narrow where plaque and food particles can cause cavities. The sealant makes the tooth easier to clean.

Why are dental x-rays important? Are they safe?

It's important for the pediatric dentist to take x-rays to diagnose cavities that start in between the teeth. When cavities begin to develop between the teeth, they cannot be seen with a naked eye. Catching cavities in their early stages are the easiest to fix. Lead aprons and high speed digital films are used to ensure safety and minimize the amount of exposure.

How can I prevent decay caused by nursing?

Avoid nursing children to sleep or putting anything other than water in their bottle at bedtime.

What should I do if my child has a tooth ache?

Rinse the mouth with warm salt water. Apply a cold compress to the area if it is swollen. Give your child the appropriate oral dose of acetaminophen (Tylenol) or ibuprofen (Advil) for discomfort. See your pediatric dentist as soon as possible.

What should I do if my child knocks out a tooth by accident?

First, remain calm. For a baby tooth, calm your child and make sure they are comfortable. Follow instructions from 'tooth ache' question above. Locate missing tooth or pieces if possible and bring them to your pediatric dentist. For a permanent tooth, locate tooth and handle it by the crown and not the root. Rinse tooth with water only. Do not scrub the tooth or handle it unnecessarily. Inspect the tooth for fractures and if it is sound, try to reinsert it into the socket. Have your child hold it in place by biting down on moist cloth. If you can't reinsert the tooth, transport the tooth in a cup with their saliva or milk. The patient must see a dentist IMMEDIATELY. Time is a critical factor in saving the tooth.

What can I do to protect my child's teeth during sporting events?

Soft plastic mouth guards can be used to protect a child's teeth, cheeks, lips and gums from sports related injuries. A custom fitted mouth guard made by your pediatric dentist will protect your child from injuries during sports and even provide protection from severe head injuries including concussion. Concussions can be reduced by 80% just by wearing a mouth guard.

How can parents prevent their child's tooth decay?

Have your child eat a balanced diet. Supervise regular brushing and flossing at home. Keep regular check-ups with your pediatric dentist. By following recommendations you can help your child develop a lifetime of healthy habits.