

Early Childhood Caries

It is important that parents realize that baby's teeth are at risk as soon as they erupt into the mouth. Early Childhood Caries also referred to as Nursing Bottle Decay or Nursing Decay, sadly, is a fairly common condition found in teeth of infants or young children. Early childhood Caries is a condition that destroys baby teeth due to prolonged and frequent exposure to milk, breast milk, and sugary liquids; such as formula, juices and sodas. It is estimated that about one in four children will have some degree of Early Childhood Caries.

As soon as the baby's teeth erupt they become covered with plaque, which is a sticky film of bacteria that forms on everyone's teeth and gums. This film or bacteria takes the sugars out of the milk, juices, formula, ect and uses it to form an acid that eats away at the enamel of teeth. This causes the enamel to become rough and pitted, like fine sand paper, and this makes the tooth difficult to clean and provides microscopic pits and indentations in the enamel that harbor the bacterial plaque. The longer the teeth are exposed to drinks that provide the sugar to the plaque, the deeper the pitting gets and in a matter of only a few weeks, these pits can turn into cavities particularly if the teeth are being bathed with milk, formula, or juices for long periods of time several times a day.

The good news is Early Childhood Caries can be totally prevented by following a few simple rules: Once the child's teeth have erupted into the mouth, never let the child fall asleep with a bottle or sippy cup containing any liquids except plain water. If your baby is already using a milk bottle at bedtime you may have to gradually dilute the milk with water over two or three weeks to stop the habit. Also singing, reading or rocking may help your child fall asleep without a bottle. Some times you

can substitute a pacifier for the bottle. Never fill your baby's bottle with sugary liquids like apple juice, orange juice, sugar water or soft drink or dip the pacifier into honey, syrup or sugar. Try not to substitute a sippy cup for a bottle and allow your child to continue taking formula, milk or juices in the sippy cup because it is just as harmful as a bottle. It is a good idea to have a specific time of the day your child takes a bottle or sippy cup with a meal. In between meals offer the child, water four or five times a day. Try to wean your child off the bottle at 12 months unless your physician advises otherwise. Start cleaning your child's teeth as soon as they erupt into the mouth and never let your child go to bed without cleaning off the plaque. In Lafayette there is no fluoride added to the water so start your child on a fluoride prescription at six months of age. This can be provided by the pediatrician or a dentist.

Finally, and probably most important, your child should see a dentist before the first birthday. A good time to schedule the first appointment with the dentist is when you schedule the 6-month "well-baby" visit with the pediatrician. This is where you will learn the proper cleaning techniques, proper use of fluoride and be advised about bottles, sippy cups and pacifiers and how they can adversely affect your child's dental health. Routine visits from age one on have proven to reduce dental cost over a lifetime and promote good dental health.

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