



Baby Bottle Tooth Decay

Baby Bottle Tooth Decay (BBTD) is caused by prolonged contact with almost any liquid other than water. This can happen from putting him/her to bed with a bottle of formula, milk, juice, soft drinks, sugar water, sugared drinks, etc. Allowing him/her to suck on a bottle or breastfeed for longer than a mealtime, either when awake or asleep, can also cause BBTD.

When liquid from a baby bottle builds up in the mouth, the natural or added sugars found in the liquid are changed to acid by germs in the mouth. This acid then starts to dissolve the teeth (mainly the upper front teeth), causing them to decay. Baby Bottle Tooth Decay can lead to severe damage to your child's baby teeth and can also cause dental problems that affect his/ her permanent teeth.

But there are steps you can take to prevent Baby Bottle Tooth Decay. Keep these pointers in mind as you care for your child's teeth:

- **Never put your child to bed with a bottle.** By 7 or 8 months of age, most children no longer need feedings during the night. Children who drink bottles while lying down also may be more prone to getting ear infections.
- **Only give your baby a bottle during meals.** Do not use the bottle as a pacifier; do not allow your child to walk around with it or to drink it for extended periods. These practices not only may lead to BBTD, but children can suffer tooth injuries if they fall while sucking on a bottle.
- **Teach your child to drink from a cup** as soon as possible, usually by 1 year of age. Drinking from a cup does not cause the liquid to collect around the teeth, and a cup cannot be taken to bed. If you are concerned that a cup may be messier than a bottle, especially when you are away from home, use one that has a snap-on lid with a straw or a special valve to prevent spilling.
- **Keep your baby's mouth clean.** This is an important part of preventing tooth decay. After feedings, gently brush your baby's gums and any baby teeth with a soft infant toothbrush.
- **Use water and a soft child-sized toothbrush for daily cleaning** once your child has 7 to 8 teeth.

By the time your toddler is 2 years of age, you should be brushing his/her teeth once or twice a day, preferably after breakfast and before bedtime. Once you are sure your child will spit, and not swallow, toothpaste, you should begin using a fluoride toothpaste. Use a pea-sized amount of toothpaste to limit the amount he can accidentally swallow.

What's the best way to get a child to stop sucking his/her thumb or using a pacifier?

As a first step in dealing with your child's sucking habits, ignore them! Most often, they will stop on their own. Harsh words, teasing, or punishment may upset your child and is not an effective way to get rid of habits. Instead, try the following:

- Praise and reward your child when he does not suck his thumb or use the pacifier. Star charts, daily rewards, and gentle reminders, especially during the day, are also very helpful.
- If your child uses sucking to relieve boredom, keep his hands busy or distract him with things he finds fun.
- If you see changes in the roof of your child's mouth (palate) or in the way the teeth are lining up, talk to your pediatrician or pediatric dentist. There are devices that can be put in the mouth that make it uncomfortable to suck on a finger or thumb.

No matter what method you try, be sure to explain them to your child. If they make your child afraid or tense, stop them at once.

The good news is that most children stop their sucking habits before they get very far in school. This is because of peer pressure. While your child might still use sucking as a way of going to sleep or calming down when upset, this is usually done in private and is not harmful. Putting too much pressure on your child to stop may cause more harm than good. Be assured your child will eventually stop the habit on his own.

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Dental Health — Effects of Pacifiers, Thumbsucking and Diet

If a child sucks strongly on a pacifier, his thumb or his fingers, this habit may affect the shape of his mouth or how his teeth are lining up. If a child stops using a pacifier by 3 years of age, his/her bite will most likely correct itself. If a child stops sucking on a pacifier, his thumb or his fingers before his permanent front teeth come in, there's a chance his bite will correct itself. If your child continues his sucking habit after his adult teeth have come in, then orthodontic care may be needed to realign his teeth.

Sweets like candy or cookies can lead to tooth decay. Sugar from fruits and fruit juices left on the teeth for a long time is not healthy for teeth. Frequent sipping on drinks such as fruit juices and sodas can also cause tooth decay. Starchy foods, such as crackers, and sticky foods and candies, such as raisins, fruit roll-ups and gummy bears, tend to stay on the teeth longer. These foods also are more likely to lead to tooth decay.

Starches and fruits, however, are a necessary part of any child's diet. To avoid tooth decay, give your child these foods only at mealtime (before the teeth have been brushed). For healthy teeth, offer your child a well-balanced diet with a variety of foods. Drinking water with fluoride is an excellent way to keep teeth healthy.

During regular well-child visits, your child's pediatrician will check his/her teeth and gums to make sure they are healthy. If your child has dental problems, your child's pediatrician may refer him/her to a dental professional.

A pediatric dentist specializes in the care of children's teeth, but some general dentists also treat children. Pediatricians may refer children younger than 1 year to a dental professional if the child:

- Chips or injures a tooth or has an injury to the face or mouth.
- Has teeth that show any signs of discoloration. This could be a sign of tooth decay.
- Complains of tooth pain or is sensitive to hot or cold foods or liquids. This could also be a sign of decay.
- Has any abnormal lesion (growth) inside the mouth.
- Has an unusual bite — the teeth do not fit together right.

Regular dental checkups, a balanced diet, fluoride, injury prevention, habit control, and brushing and flossing are all important for healthy teeth. Starting children off with good dental habits now will help them grow up with healthy smiles.