



5 steps for healthy teeth in kids

Give your kids something to smile about by thinking about their dental needs from an early age.

Did you know ... that more than a quarter of children entering preschool have cavities?¹ In fact, dental care is the most common unmet health need in children of all ages. In addition, tooth decay can affect their overall health and is a real distraction to academic success in school.² Kids with tooth decay are also prone to repeated infections in their ears and sinuses.^{3,4}

The good news is ... there are several ways to help ensure healthy teeth and gums, some of which may be covered through your health insurance.⁵ Dr. Franklin Woo, DDS, MS, MPA, dental director for Blue Shield of California, provides **five easy steps** every parent can take.



Step 1: Arrange regular dental visits

Simply taking your child to the dentist at 6 months of age – even if your child is toothless – is the perfect way to start. It means they'll get used to the smells, noises, and look of a dental office. Bring your child back to the dentist at 12 months of age for a dental checkup, to have a dental hygienist brush their teeth and gums, and to have fluoride varnish applied to their teeth. Then make regular visits every six months thereafter.⁶



Step 2: Give your child fluoridated water

Drinking fluoridated water can reduce the number of cavities in children by 90%. When swallowed and ingested before the age of 7, the fluoride is incorporated into the tooth structure, making teeth more resistant to acid attack.



Step 3: Monitor your child's pacifier use

Overusing pacifiers affects mouth and teeth development, just like long-term thumb-sucking. It causes a child's upper front teeth to tip forward, leading to bite problems later on. In addition, minimizing saliva-sharing activities (like licking pacifiers as well as sharing utensils) between children and parents limits bacterial transmission.



Step 4: Encourage good nutrition

Nourish the body and the teeth will benefit. Sugar and acid corrode teeth and cause cavities. Just another reason why sugar should be limited. Calcium-rich foods such as low-fat milk and yogurt, salmon, and leafy green vegetables help promote strong teeth and bones.



Step 5: Make brushing a family activity

You should brush your child's teeth until they are able to do so on their own. When they can do it independently, create a new family activity by brushing teeth together. By doing so, you can observe your child to make sure that they are doing it correctly and not swallowing the toothpaste. Kids tend to treat toothpaste like candy.

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1. "Emerging Issues in Oral Health" American Academy of Pediatric Health, aapd.org.
2. Li X, Tronstad L, Olsen I. Brain abscesses caused by oral infection. *Endod Dent Traumatol.* 1999; 15: 95-101.
3. US Department of Health and Human Services. Oral Health in America: A Report of the Surgeon General. National Institute of Dental and Craniofacial Research website. <http://www.nidcr.nih.gov/DataStatistics/SurgeonGeneral/sgr/home.htm>. Accessed Oct. 5, 2013.
4. Vann Jr. WF, Divaris K, Gizlice Z, Baker AD, Lee JY. Caregivers' Health Literacy and Their Young Children's Oral-health-related Expenditures. *Journal of Dental Research.* 2013; 92(7): S55-S62.
5. If you have an Individual and Family Plan or have medical coverage through a small group employer, pediatric dental and vision for children under age 19 is covered.
6. Blue Shield of California pediatric dental coverage includes an extra fluoride treatment for children at risk of "caries," which is chronic, infectious, and transmissible tooth decay in young children.