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What you need to know about your child's teeth

Common questions parents aren't asking their dentist but should be.



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Dental disease is the most common chronic disease in children, contributing to 52 million lost school hours. (Photo: Operation Shooting/Shutterstock)

Taking care of your kids' teeth might seem as simple as making sure they brush every night, but there's more to good oral health than just brushing. Besides, good dental habits will stay with them for life. Dental disease is a big deal — it's the most common chronic disease in children, contributing to 52 million lost school hours. So what can parents do to make sure they're covering all the bases? Here are a few common questions parents aren't asking their dentist but should be.

Is my water fluoridated? Many parents don't know whether their city's water is fluoridated, says Dr. Natalia Chalmers, pediatric dental expert at [DentaQuest Institute](#), a national nonprofit organization dedicated to improving oral health. Fluoride has been shown to reduce cavities in baby and adult teeth by hardening the tooth enamel, and it works most effectively when it's ingested systemically during the early years to develop primary and permanent teeth while they're still forming in the jaw.

How can my child get fluoride? If your community's water isn't fluoridated, your dentist or pediatrician will likely prescribe drops (for babies ages 6 months and up) or tablets. Ask about your child's risk without fluoride. However, Chalmers says, "Do consider where your kids spend most of their day. Your own water may not be fluoridated, but if the kids go to grandma's house or daycare where the water is fluoridated, they may be getting enough." It's possible to get too much, so talk with your dentist about the right amount. Learn about your county's water at the Center for Disease Control and Prevention's [My Water's Fluoride](#) site. (Be aware, not all states participate.)



Create a family culture of brushing twice a day, using fluoridated toothpaste and flossing. (Photo: Oksana Kuzmina/Shutterstock)

What should I know about good preventative care at home? Good prevention habits reduce the risk of cavities, and dental sealants, one of the best preventative measures, can reduce disease by 80 percent, Chalmers says. Creating a family culture of brushing twice a day and receiving preventative care means most kids today can grow up cavity-free. Prevention includes visiting the dentist once or twice a year, and consistent brushing, flossing and use of fluoride. Chalmers recommends the first dental visit as early as age 1 (or six months after the first tooth comes in), primarily to establish a relationship before oral health issues develop, and also to begin prevention conversations.

Early appointments will be light and fun, introducing your child to age-appropriate concepts. DentaQuest features a [Kids Korner](#) with videos and games to teach kids about brushing and flossing.

In 2014, the American Dental Association [updated its guidelines](#) to recommend fluoridated toothpaste for all kids. Kids younger than 3 should get just a smear, a rice grain amount, as soon as first teeth emerge. Kids ages 3 to 6 should use a pea-sized amount, twice a day, and should spit rather than swallow. It's okay not to rinse because teeth benefit from the topical fluoride, Chalmers says.

Once your child's teeth fit closely together, help them floss once a day until they can do it themselves (around age 6 or 7, typically). A floss stick may make flossing easier.

Is snacking too much harmful? Just as important as what kids snack on is how often they snack. Sugary and starchy products interact with the mouth bacteria to create a high-acid environment that's harmful to teeth. When kids eat something sugary or starchy — and what kid doesn't like Goldfish crackers? — it takes 20 to 30 minutes to bring back the balance in their mouth, so if a child snacks every 20 to 30 minutes on crackers or chips, the teeth are under constant attack. Chalmers recommends structured snacks, say mid-morning and mid-afternoon, to limit the harmful effects on teeth from ongoing acid attacks.



High-fiber, crunchy fruits such as apples and pears make good snacks because they require longer chewing time and stimulate saliva, which wards off acid attacks. (Photo: Cheryl Casey/Shutterstock)

What are the best snacks? Cheese is a power snack for teeth because it doesn't contain sugar and it coats the mouth in a protective layer that has been shown to neutralize plaque acid. Other good snacks are high-fiber, crunchy fruits such as apples and pears. Because they require longer chewing time, crunchy fruits stimulate saliva, which wards off acid attacks. (But any fresh fruit benefits kids' diets.) Carrots and celery do the same and actually clean the teeth — but all vegetables are good. When age-appropriate, nuts are great, providing vitamins and minerals that benefit teeth.

Worst snacks? The worst snacks include anything sticky, even dried fruit, which sticks to the grooves of teeth. In fact, those innocent-looking [raisins can be worse than candy](#) because their non-soluble cellulose fiber can trap sugars on the tooth, according to San Antonio Children's Dentistry Cute Smiles 4 Kids website. High processed starchy foods — think pasta and white bread — lodge in the crevices of teeth and convert to sugar almost immediately, creating the high-acid environment so bad for teeth. Carbonated drinks and fruit juice teem with sugar that makes acid attacks stronger. It's not that kids can't have starchy snacks or fruit juice; it's just best not to be chewing or sipping on these kinds of foods all day long.

How important is water? For healthy teeth, water is an indispensable part of any kid's diet. Plus it's good for their bodies. Make sure your kids get enough both for hydration but also to rinse their teeth after that starchy or sugary snack.

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