

# Prenatal and Infant Oral Health Tips

*As a Pediatric Dentist, Dr. Fern Cytryn's primary goal is the promotion of good oral health for children. She follows the recommendations of the American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry. Dr. Cytryn believes that starting oral health care when children are infants sets the foundation for a lifetime of healthy smiles.*

**Q. What can a woman do during pregnancy to help her child develop healthier teeth?**

A. Nutrition is very important for oral health of the developing fetus. Taking prenatal vitamins and minerals, as recommended by your Obstetrician, is key since the teeth are forming along with the other structures of the body between 7 weeks and 3 months of gestation. Consumption of alcohol is not recommended during pregnancy since it crosses the placenta and affects the developing fetus in innumerable ways.

**Q. Is there anything else a mother-to-be can do?**

A. Yes, she should take good care of her own dental health during pregnancy and after the baby is born. A mother with a buildup of bacteria in her own mouth due to tooth decay and/or periodontal disease, can actually transmit bacteria to the baby via kissing, sharing spoons, licking a pacifier "clean" (yes, some parents do this), etc.

**Q. Does fluoride consumption by a pregnant woman help the developing baby?**

A. No. Fluoride doesn't cross the placenta; therefore it has no benefits until after the baby is born and can receive fluoride directly.

**Q. At what age should a baby first be seen by the Pediatric Dentist?**

A. We like to see babies at 6 months of age or before that if their first tooth develops earlier. We have a lot to cover. Not only do we examine their teeth, but we talk about diet, pacifier and thumb sucking, and the importance of cleaning the inside of your baby's mouth with a wet washcloth to remove any sugar residue from milk, formula or juices. In addition, we discuss fluoride treatment and testing well water for fluoride content.

**Q. Do regular Dentists see children this early?**

A. Often not. Many adult-oriented Dentists do not see children until at least age 3. But the impact of early childhood dental care is significant. If cavities form during this time, they should be addressed before infection and tooth loss occurs.

**Q. How can I prevent tooth decay from a bottle or nursing?**

A. Encourage your child to drink from a cup as they approach their first birthday. Children should not fall asleep with a bottle. At-will nighttime breast-feeding should be avoided after the first primary (baby) teeth begin to erupt. Drinking juice from a bottle should be avoided. When juice is offered, it should be in a cup.

**Q. When should bottle-feeding be stopped?**

A. Children should begin to be weaned from their bottle when they begin table food. At this time they should also be introduced to drinking from a cup. This is important for your child's teeth, prolonged use of the bottle means having milk or juice in contact with teeth for long periods of time, which can lead to tooth decay.

**Q. Should I worry about thumb and finger sucking?**

A. Thumb sucking is perfectly normal for infants and most stop by age 2. Prolonged thumb sucking can create crowded, crooked teeth or bite problems. Dr. Fern will be glad to suggest ways to address a prolonged thumb sucking habit.

**Q. When should I start cleaning my baby's teeth?**

A. The sooner the better! Starting at birth, clean your child's gums and mouth with a wet washcloth. Remember that most small children do not have the dexterity to brush their teeth effectively.

**Q. Any advice on teething?**

A. From 6 months to age 3, your child may have sore gums as teeth come into their mouths. Many children like a clean teething ring, cool spoon, or cold wet washcloth. Some parents swear by a chilled (refrigerator never freezer) ring; others simply rub the baby's gums with a clean finger.

**Q. How prevalent is tooth decay in children?**

A. Tooth decay, or dental caries or cavities, are the most common oral disease in childhood. It is an infectious and transmissible disease established early in life and seen throughout life. Despite remarkable declines in tooth decay over recent decades, it remains the single most common chronic disease of childhood – 5-8 times more common than asthma – affecting nearly 20% of preschoolers, 50% of second graders and 75% of 15 year olds. It is found that 80% of tooth decay is in 25% of children.

