

# Ask the Pediatrician: Do babies get tooth decay, and when do they start brushing teeth?

January 9 2023, by Dr. David M. Krol

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Tooth decay (dental caries) is one of the most common chronic childhood diseases in the United States.

The good news is there are ways to prevent it.

Even the tiniest teeth can decay. There are habits you can start now to keep your baby's teeth healthy. And when that first tooth shows up, there are ways your pediatrician can keep it healthy, too. Here is what you need to know.

Everyone, even babies, can get tooth decay. Children living in poverty, in an ethnic or racial minority groups, or with special health care needs are at more risk for dental decay. Other reasons a child could be high risk include:

- The child's mother or main caregiver had tooth decay in the past 12 months or does not have a regular source of dental care.
- White spots appear on the child's teeth. These spots are a sign the tooth is losing calcium and minerals that keep it strong.
- Tan, brown or black spots appear or you see cavities (pits) on the teeth. This is a sign that the tooth is decaying.

Fortunately, your family's tap water probably has [fluoride](#) added to it. Fluoride is a safe and useful cavity-fighting ingredient that has been added to drinking water since 1945.

Fluoride is a natural mineral that can slow down or stop cavities from forming. When you drink fluoridated water every day, the fluoride makes it hard for bacteria in your mouth to make acid. Fluoride also rebuilds tooth enamel (the outer layer of the tooth), and it even makes teeth stronger.

Check with your local water utility agency to find out if your water has

fluoride. The [health benefits](#) work when the [drinking water](#) has 0.7 mg/L of fluoride. If your community water supply does not have fluoride or you live on a private well, ask your doctor if you should get a prescription for fluoride drops or chewable tablets for your child.

As soon as your baby's first tooth erupts, it's time to start using fluoride toothpaste. Here's how to do it:

- Use a tiny smear—the size of a grain of rice—until age 3. Clean the teeth at least twice a day. It's best to clean them right after breakfast and before bedtime.
- Use a pea-sized amount of fluoride toothpaste when your child is 3 years old. Teach your child to spit without rinsing.
- Assist or supervise kids during toothbrushing until they master the task, usually at around 10 years of age.

Do not put your baby to bed with a bottle at night or at naptime. It is also not a good idea to let your baby use a bottle filled with a sweet drink or dip your baby's pacifier in anything sweet like sugar or honey. If you do put your baby to bed with a bottle, fill it only with water. You can give your baby about 4-8 ounces of water per day starting at around 6 months. (Remember, the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) recommends breastfeeding as the sole source of nutrition for your baby for about 6 months.)

When your baby is 6 months, your pediatrician will start to do [oral health](#) checkups and apply fluoride varnish. Pediatricians are trained to apply fluoride varnish because many [young children](#) do not see or have access to a dentist until they are older. All infants and children should have fluoride varnish every 6 months until age 5. Children might need it every 3 months if they have a higher risk of dental decay.

Varnish is used to help prevent or slow down [tooth decay](#). It is painted

on the top and sides of each tooth and hardens quickly. The process is safe and does not hurt.

Fluoride varnish is a "preventive care service" for children. This means all public and private health insurance plans should cover fluoride varnish. No part of the cost should be shared by patients or families.

Oral health starts early. Be ready to discuss your family's plan for a "dental home." All [children](#) need access to a dentist for regular care. See your child's dentist by their first birthday or within six months of their first tooth. At this first visit, your dentist can easily check your child's teeth and determine the frequency of future dental checkups.

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