

# Taking care of your child's smile

**A**s soon as your baby's teeth break through the gums, they need attention and care.

In fact, the American Dental Association recommends that you bring your baby to the dentist soon after the first tooth comes in and no later than the child's first birthday. This visit gives your dentist a chance to check for tooth decay and discuss other conditions or habits, such as thumb sucking, that may affect the teeth. The dentist also can show you how to clean your baby's teeth properly.

As soon as the first tooth comes into place, start brushing your child's teeth with a toothbrush designed for children. For children younger than 3 years, place on the toothbrush only a smear of fluoride-containing toothpaste or an amount about the size of a grain of rice (Figure, left). For children 3 to 6 years of age, you should place no more than a pea-sized amount of fluoride-containing toothpaste on the toothbrush (Figure, right). Brush the child's teeth gently twice every day (morning and night) or as directed by your dentist.

Fluoride is an important cavity fighter. It can be swallowed (also called "systemic") or applied to the surface of the tooth (also called "topical"). Systemic fluoride, such as that contained in water and other beverages and in prescription fluoride supplements, interacts with teeth before they come through the gums—or erupt. It strengthens the developing tooth enamel, helping it fight tooth decay in the future. After teeth erupt, topical fluoride, such as that

in fluoride toothpastes and rinses, helps rebuild weakened tooth enamel from the outside. In this way, topical fluoride even can reverse the beginnings of tooth decay.

Although fluoride toothpaste is a good source of topical fluoride, it should not be swallowed. It contains more fluoride than fluoridated water or fluoride supplements,

and swallowing it every day can affect the color on the developing permanent teeth that have not yet erupted. Toothpaste is not candy. Use only the recommended amount on the brush and tell your child to spit out—do not swallow—the foamy paste.

## CARING FOR PERMANENT TEETH

Permanent teeth should start coming in when your child is 6 or 7 years old, and they will continue to erupt



**Figure.** When brushing your child's teeth, use a toothbrush made for children. For children younger than 3 years, place on the toothbrush a smear of fluoride-containing toothpaste or an amount about the size of a grain of rice (left). For children 3 to 6 years of age, place no more than a pea-sized amount of fluoride-containing toothpaste (right) on the toothbrush.

throughout the teenage years and possibly even into the early adult years. Brushing twice a day for two minutes with a fluoride-containing toothpaste and cleaning between the teeth once daily with floss or another interdental cleaner will be important habits for your child to adopt. Regular dental checkups also are essential for good oral health. Checkups allow your dentist to identify problems, such as tooth decay, and begin treatment as soon as possible. They also allow for professional cleanings and fluoride applications that will keep your child's teeth strong.

Your dentist may suggest applying dental sealants to the chewing surfaces of your child's back teeth (premolars and molars) to help protect against tooth decay. These chewing surfaces have deep pits and grooves in which food and plaque can build up and destroy the enamel surface of your child's teeth.

Caring for your child's mouth from the start is key to good oral health. Talk with your dentist about ways to give your child a healthy smile for life.

## CHOOSING DENTAL PRODUCTS

When shopping for products to help you care for your child's teeth—or your own—look for the ADA Seal of Acceptance on the package. This Seal is given to products that have met the ADA's guidelines for safety and effectiveness. ■

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