




ILCA's INSIDE TRACK

a resource for breastfeeding mothers

A Publication of the International
Lactation Consultant Association 

Taking Care of Your Breastfed Baby's Teeth

By Amy Peterson BS, IBCLC, and Scott Chandler, DMD

Tooth decay is common in kids: Over 40% of kids will have tooth decay by school age. The good news is that most tooth decay can be stopped.

Old research found breastfeeding at night caused tooth decay; but these studies did not look at babies who were only breastfeeding. The studies included babies who were drinking some formula. Newer research shows breastfeeding lowers the risk of tooth decay. Most babies breastfeed at night. Night feedings are important for the baby to get enough food. Breastfeeding at night does not cause tooth decay. Some kids get tooth decay. It is not because they breastfeed.

What causes tooth decay

- Bacteria like to grow in the mouth when the pH is low. Most foods cause the mouth to have a low pH.
- The bacteria in the mouth along with food are what cause holes in the teeth. Usually the mother infects the baby with the bacteria that is in her mouth.
- Dry mouth can increase tooth decay. Saliva helps maintain normal pH. There is less saliva at night. Some medicines reduce saliva.
- "Bad teeth" are not inherited. It is infection from the mother's mouth and the foods the kids eat. Kids who are sickly have more tooth decay.

Which kind of baby milk matters

Research compared human milk with formula and their effect on teeth. Here are some of the findings.

- Human milk does not lower the pH in the baby's mouth like formula does.
- Human milk causes deposits of calcium and minerals into the teeth to protect the teeth. Because of the sugar in formula, it dissolves the teeth.
- Human milk does not cause tooth decay unless there is other food in the baby's mouth. Formulas cause tooth decay.
- Human milk helps bacteria grow a little. Formula helps bacteria grow a lot.
- Bottles drip and make formula sit in the baby's mouth. With breastfeeding, the baby swallows all the milk, so no milk sits in the mouth.

Risk group for tooth decay in kids

- Kids with special health care needs
- Kids who sleep with a bottle
- Kids with plaque, stained or chalky teeth
- Kids whose mother has lots of tooth decay
- Younger kids in the family have a higher risk
- Kids from a low-income family

So your baby will not get tooth decay, it is important that your baby drinks only breast milk, rather than both breast milk and formula.



To protect your baby's teeth

- Take care of your own mouth to reduce bacteria that you can give to your baby. Brush at least twice a day, floss every day, and visit your dentist twice a year. If you drink fruit juice, choose 100% juice and drink it with meals.
- When your baby's teeth come in, begin cleaning them twice a day. Most babies enjoy having their gums rubbed, and cleaning baby teeth is as simple as gently wiping the teeth with a soft, wet washcloth.
- Buy your baby a toothbrush. Do not put your own toothbrush into your baby's mouth.
- When your baby begins drinking liquids other than breast milk, offer water. Water does not lower the pH in the mouth.
- Toddlers who eat breakfast and consume 5 servings of whole fruits and vegetables daily have a lower risk of tooth decay.
- Make sure your baby goes to bed with a clean mouth. Breastfeeding at night is a good defense against dry mouth, does not lower the pH, and increases saliva.
- There is a lot of sugar in most medicines. If your baby needs medicine at bedtime, make sure you brush the baby's teeth after.
- Save these foods for special treats: fruit juices, dried fruits, crackers and chips.
- Avoid giving your baby or toddler soda pop.
- Avoid putting your baby's hands, toys, pacifiers, spoons, or cups in your mouth.
- After your baby eats food, offer your baby a small amount of water to drink to clean the mouth.

Fluoride: Do not give fluoride drops to your baby for the first 6 months.

From 6 months to 3 years old, give fluoride drops if the fluoride in the drinking water supply is less than 0.3 ppm. Talk with your doctor or dentist about the fluoride in the water in your area, including if you use city water or well water. Currently, bottled water does not list fluoride content.

Visiting a dentist

- It is important to take your baby to the dentist at 1 year old. You can request to hold your baby for the whole visit. A visit to the dentist is 5 to 10 minutes.
- Take your child to the dentist once a year at 1, 2, and 3 years old. Your child can sit in your lap while the dentist looks at the teeth.
- When your child is 4 years old, take your child to the dentist every 6 months.

If you have questions, call an IBCLC or other breastfeeding helper.