

Childhood Decay on the Rise?

Start oral care early!



These are the common laments that are heard from parents at Thomson Dental Centre at Novena Specialist Center. During the recent March school holidays, Thomson babies born between the years of 2003 to 2009 were seen at the dental clinic here, most for preventive care but some already with multiple teeth suffering from decay.

Early childhood caries or ECC has been highlighted in the news lately. The Straits times recently reported a twofold increase in the number of children with severe dental decay attended to at the National Dental Centre. Is your child at risk?

40% of young children in Singapore suffer from Early Childhood Caries

In Singapore, lack of awareness in the parents regarding 'milk bottle caries' means that many children are still drinking milk and juices from the milk bottle beyond the recommended one year. Some patients seen at Thomson Dental Centre are still using the milk bottle up to the ages of 8-10 years!

Dental decay (known as caries) starts when fermentable foods remain for a period of time on the teeth. Decay-causing bacteria break down these food particles and produce cavity-inducing acids that rapidly eat into the tooth surface, causing dental caries. How do parents and caregivers prevent this very common problem?

Dental professionals at Thomson Dental Centre agree that a three-pronged early approach is advisable: Good oral hygiene habits from a young age; diet supervision and management; and early dental check-ups from the age of one onwards.

Diet Supervision

To reduce the risk of tooth decay,

- Limit drinks and snacks that contain sugar.
- Avoid sipping and snacking throughout the day or 'grazing', as this means placing teeth at risk of decay throughout the day.
- Offer food for the child only at fixed mealtimes, whenever possible. If a child has to take sugary food and drinks, having them with meals helps wash out food particles and neutralise the bad decay-causing acids in the mouth.
- Have on hand a variety of nutritious and balanced snack options that are low in sugar. Cut up cubes of cheese and fresh fruits and place them in containers in the fridge for quick and easy snacks. Biscuits are not advisable as they contain unhealthy sugars and trans fat.
- Drinking water can help prevent tooth decay by washing away the sugars.

"What? He has 8 cavities already? But he's only four and has never complained of pain before!"

"He likes sweets and sugary things, but hates to brush."

Good Oral Hygiene Habits

- Make it a habit to wipe the gum arch after feeding with a clean, wet gauze or towel wrapped over a finger. This removes milk and food residues, while training the infant to get used to having the gums and teeth cleaned.
- When the baby teeth first erupt, brush them gently twice a day with a baby-sized toothbrush. Toothpastes with fluorides are not recommended until the age of two or when the child is able to spit.
- Children need an adult to brush for them twice daily until the age of six but should be allowed to try brushing with the toothbrush. Thereafter, the child may brush independently with an adult's supervision until the age of nine.
- Mothers and caregivers should avoid sharing food or chewing the food meant for infants and toddlers as they may spread decay-causing bacteria.
- Children should be weaned out of the milk bottle by the age of one, and are encouraged to drink from a cup by the first birthday.

Early Dental Check-ups

- Schedule the first dental check-up by the child's first birthday. This should be a well-baby check-up by the dentist to ensure that the evaluations and assessments of the child's risk of developing tooth decay are carried out.
- Bring your child to the dentist twice a year, instead of waiting till problems appear. Your child will start looking forward to the visits, and will not associate them with negative experiences.

By spending a few minutes each day to care for your child's teeth and visiting the dentist early, you can help ensure that your child's smile gets off to a healthy start with good dental habits that carry into adulthood.