Keep your child's teeth, mouth healthy for overall well-being: NetWellness

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Young, curious, and full of life, children serve as our guarantee that the future will be promising; therefore, health is a first priority for their future. Thus, when it comes to overall health, keep your child’s teeth and mouth on the short list.

Just how common is tooth decay?

Scary as it seems, tooth decay is now the No. 1 chronic infectious disease in children. In fact, according to the American Academy of Pediatrics, it is five times more common in kids than asthma and seven times more common than hay fever.

A recent Case Western Reserve University Study found that in a screening of 3,000 children in Head Start, 45 percent had early tooth decay as compared with the national average of 27 percent. Even more alarming, the University Hospitals Rainbow Babies' and Children's Hospital reports tooth aches to be the No. 1 pediatric emergency. This emergency doesn't just involve
children and hospitals -- 50 million hours of school were missed in the United States last year by children with tooth aches, making this an important concern for any parent.

The silence of decay

It is common for parents to give their young children sippy cups or bottles throughout their infancy. The problem is that what goes into these containers causes early tooth decay. In an effort to keep their baby occupied, parents often give their children milk, water, or, most alarmingly, soda. The sugars in all these drinks, except water, slowly eat away at the sensitive teeth of the child. Tooth decay does not happen instantly; instead it is a progressive problem that develops on the back of the teeth. By the time decay makes its way to the front of the teeth, significant cavities have already formed. To show how dangerous it is to give kids sugared beverages -- especially through a bottle or sippy cup -- a primary, or baby tooth, left in a glass of soda will dissolve within a week.

Why tooth decay should matter to you

Parents should realize that a child's mouth is a gateway for their entire body and overall health. If child tooth decay goes untreated, the child is subject to many harmful, if not fatal, infections. Some negative effects of cavities include:

- Complete tooth decay, resulting in tooth loss
- Spread of decay to surrounding teeth
- Slowing of overall growth or development
- Formation of tooth abscess, which is a collection of infected pus caused by bacteria infections within teeth
- Spreading of infection to surrounding soft tissue or the jaw bone
- Spreading of infection throughout the body to places like the neck or brain

The secret lies in prevention

As startling and dangerous as these oral issues seem, they are 100 percent preventable through oral hygiene and routine dentist visits. To help protect the dental and overall health of their child, parents should be sure to do the following:

- Make sure their child sees a dentist by age 1.
- Ask a dentist about receiving a fluoride varnish application twice a year for your child's primary teeth. This application protects the child's teeth and re-mineralizes areas of initial decay called white spot lesions. Also, inquire about dental sealants. This is a proven way to protect the top surfaces of permanent molars against tooth decay.
- Keep in mind that the earlier the treatment the better. By age 2 it...
may be too late to provide some protective measure like the fluoride varnish.

**Don't be afraid to seek proper care**

Taking care of your child's teeth is a partnership between you, your family doctor or pediatrician, and your child's dentist. Therefore, you can help ensure that your child gets the best care. When your child sees the doctor for a visit, ask them to check for tooth decay. Also, if decay is discovered, make sure the physician refers you to the proper dentist or specialist. The American Academy of Pediatrics finds that 96 percent of primary care doctors take the time to refer parents of children with tooth decay to a dentist. But the study found that only half the time will your doctor take the time to schedule the appointment for you. You are an important part of the team to be sure your child gets the best care.

**What can I do to protect my child's teeth?**

The care of primary teeth is just as important as the care of permanent teeth, so parents should make sure their child's first teeth are kept healthy. There are many ways that parents can ensure the best dental health of their kids:

- Brush with a soft-bristled toothbrush; hard bristles can break down the teeth and gums and cause infection.
- Make sure only a smear or pea-sized amount of toothpaste is used -- any more than that can result in a harmful overdose of fluoride to the permanent teeth called fluorosis.
- Make sure your child is drinking enough water; it contains small levels of fluoride, which protects teeth. For people using well water it's important to have water checked for fluoride content about every three years. If levels are low, talk to your doctor or dentist to see if your child should take oral fluoride supplements. Each situation needs to be looked at separately in terms of other possible fluoride sources (e.g. school or daycare), as children need enough fluoride but not too much.
- Don't use bottles or sippy cups as a way to keep your child busy as these containers allow sugary drinks to attack the teeth from behind.

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