

The Importance of Early Dental Visits

By Catherine Pham, DDS, MPH

Early childhood caries (ECC), previously known as baby bottle tooth decay, remains a significant public health problem. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention report that dental caries is the most prevalent chronic disease in children. Studies from the National Institutes of Health reveal that more than 28% of children have dental caries by the time they reach kindergarten. The cause of ECC is multi-factorial; it is not only associated with a diet high in sugar and poor feeding practices, but also other factors such as tooth defects or elevated levels of oral cariogenic bacteria can also make the child more susceptible to caries.

The consequences of ECC can lead to a diminished oral-health related quality of life for the child. ECC leads to a higher risk for new decay to develop in both the primary and permanent dentitions, increased hospitalization and emergency room visits due to tooth pain and infection, loss of school days for the child (and subsequently loss of work days for the caregiver), and diminished ability of the child to learn and concentrate in school. The severity of ECC may lead to early tooth loss, affecting a child's ability to eat and speak and may affect a child's self-esteem. Because of these major consequences, the American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry (AAPD) has advocated for children to have early dental visits to establish a dental home. Early professional dental care can provide a support system for the family, with the dental home creating an environment for preventive education and oral health care.

AAPD has recommended that a child's first dental visit should be at the time of eruption of the first tooth (normally around 6 months of age) and no later than 12 months of age. Just as how medical professionals play an important role in a child's health with well-child visits, pediatric dentists can improve the overall health of children with early dental visits.

At dental appointments, pediatric dentists not only diagnose and treat disease, but can also help prevent traumatic injuries through anticipatory guidance, monitor growth and development, provide dietary counseling that contributes to reduced dental caries and preventing obesity, and proactively recognize child abuse. In addition, pediatric dentists work with the parents as a team to address feeding, oral habits, and good oral hygiene practices. It is recommended for children to visit the dentist every 6 months. As children get older, the amount of time between well-child visits with medical professionals increase, therefore, collaboration and effective communication between medical and dental professionals are essential to promote overall health among children.

During our current SARS-COV2 pandemic, it is important to encourage patients to continue to see their dentists for routine dental care. With the increased time at home, children end up snacking frequently, increasing their risk for dental caries. Dental caries can continue to progress without the adequate interventions, putting our most vulnerable children at risk for dental pain, infection, and cellulitis, leading to avoidable emergency room visits. During this public health crisis, prevention is of upmost importance to avoid contributing to an already overwhelmed healthcare system. Dental care is still essential health care, and it is important for our professions to work together to be the biggest advocates for the littlest members of our society.



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