

**HEALTH MATTERS**

# Dental health tips for children

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Here in the Dental Department at MCHC Health Centers, we are eager to see the end of the pandemic—just like everyone else. Usually in February, our dental staff spends the first Saturday of the month participating in Give Kids a Smile Day, a national volunteer event where we provide underserved children with free oral health care. Sadly, the pandemic has interrupted this tradition.

We also collaborate with local schools to provide free dental screening, sealants, and varnish treatments for young students; this has also been postponed.

We look forward to re-starting our regular routines when the pandemic ends.

Although we encourage parents to bring their children in for regular dental check-ups every six months, we understand the desire to stay home. As long as children take care of their teeth and gums, most can go without seeing their dentist for many months. Here are some recommendations to keep your children's mouths healthy and pain-free.

## For the babies and toddlers

For children ages 6 months to 2 years, it is important to wipe the inside of the mouth with a wet washcloth or gauze pad after feeding, especially at night. Breast



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milk and baby formula have sugars that can cause cavities, and if those first teeth get serious cavities or infections, treatment may require sedation with general anesthesia.

We try to avoid this at all costs on such young patients. During the day, babies and toddlers can drink water and eat other food that remove some of the sugar from their teeth, but at night, those sugars can stick around for hours.

## Choose healthy snacks

As children grow, it is important for them to establish good oral hygiene and a healthy diet. Children love to snack, which is fine. The idea is to help them choose foods that don't cause as many cavities. In general, healthy foods include those high in protein and fiber and low in sticky starches.

For example, the best options are raw, crunchy or leafy vegetables, cheese, nuts, meat, eggs, 100-percent nut butters, and water.

The next best options

are crunchy fresh fruit, whole-grain bread, popcorn, smoothies, yogurt, oatmeal, whole milk, ice cream, and dips or sauces. The snacks that are far more likely to lead to cavities include candy, cookies, dried fruit, fruit snacks/strips, pretzels, crackers, oranges and bananas, soda, juice, and sports drinks. If the food gets stuck in your teeth when you're eating, it's probably a problem.

## Share good bacteria

Another way to set your child up for success is to limit the spread of bad bacteria. We all have bacteria that live in our mouth. Some are helpful and some are harmful. If you rarely get cavities or have any dental problems, feel free to lick your child's spoon to clean it. If, on the other hand, you get lots of cavities or have had somewhat frequent mouth infections or other problems, please rinse the spoon with water. Don't share your saliva with your child.

Oral bacteria are often spread among family members.

## Knocked-out teeth or other dental trauma

Some loose teeth are fine. It is normal for children between the ages of 5 and 12 to have loose teeth as baby teeth are replaced by permanent teeth. But if a tooth becomes loose after getting hit, or if it gets knocked out altogether, it is important to seek treatment immediately.

Do not clean the tooth except for a quick rinse if necessary. Ideally, the tooth should be kept in the child's saliva. If the child is too young or not comfortable keeping the tooth between their cheek and gum, the tooth can be placed in milk, saline, or a pH-balanced save-a-tooth solution that keeps the tooth viable while you travel to the dentist's office. If you can get to a dentist within the first few hours, the dentist may be able to successfully re-implant the tooth. If you come to an MCHC Health Center site and explain your dental emergency, we will do everything we can to fit you in right away.

Even if we cannot re-implant the tooth, we can often minimize the damage after dental trauma. Sometimes quick action can save the child from further pain or damage.

## Call, video chat, or come in

If you're concerned about your child's oral health, call your dentist. We can help you determine if you need to come in or whether it's fine to wait. And just so you know, we are still doing regular check-ups, even during the pandemic.

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*Dr. Mansukhani is the Dental Director at MCHC Health Centers, a community-based and patient-directed organization that serves Mendocino and Lake counties. Learn more at [mchcinc.org](http://mchcinc.org).*