



## Child oral health Information for GPs

Dental caries (tooth decay) is the most common chronic illness in Australian children.

Tooth decay is largely preventable, but many parents and carers are unsure about how best to keep children's teeth healthy.

GPs can play an important role in improving child oral health by sharing essential information with parents and carers, and advising that children should see the dentist for regular check-ups from 12 months of age.

Children may also be eligible for Medicare-funded dental treatment under the Child Dental Benefits Schedule.

### Impacts of tooth decay

Tooth decay can lead to pain, infection and tooth loss. It can make it difficult for children to eat, speak, socialise and concentrate at school.

Treating tooth decay can be complicated and costly, and may require children to take extended time off school.

Poor oral health in childhood is the strongest predictor of further dental disease as an adult. If children have healthy teeth, and develop good oral hygiene habits early, they are more likely to enjoy a lifetime of good oral health – something that is vital for good overall health.

### Gaps in knowledge

Many parents are confused about when to start brushing children's teeth and first take them to the dentist. There is also a common, but mistaken, belief that baby teeth do not need special care because they will be replaced by the adult teeth.

New research<sup>1</sup> has found that one in three children do not have their teeth cleaned twice a day, one in three pre-schoolers have never visited a dentist, and one in four parents thought children only need to see the dentist if they have a problem with their teeth.

Many parents are also unaware that their children might be eligible for Medicare-funded treatment. Under the Child Dental Benefits Schedule, children whose families receive certain government payments can receive \$1000 of dental treatment over a two-year period. For more information, or to check eligibility, go to [www.humanservices.gov.au](http://www.humanservices.gov.au).

### Tips for parents to prevent tooth decay

- Brush children's teeth twice a day, after breakfast and before bed
- Brush with fluoride toothpaste (use low-fluoride toothpaste for kids aged 18 months to six years)
- Make children's usual drink tap water
- Floss every day
- Reduce the amount of sugar children consume in foods and drinks
- Take children to the dentist for a check-up at least once a year.

### Advice for parents caring for babies' teeth

- Start cleaning baby teeth from the time they first appear (around six to 12 months of age)
- Use a soft, damp cloth or a soft children's toothbrush
- Don't use toothpaste before 18 months of age, unless directed by your dental practitioner
- Take babies to see the dentist when their first tooth appears, or by their first birthday
- Don't let babies fall asleep with a bottle of milk, formula or juice in their mouth
- Replace bottles with a cup from 12 months of age.

<sup>1</sup> The Royal Children's Hospital National Child Health Poll: Child oral health, 2018