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Baby teeth and beyond

Your baby's first checkup gets things started to healthy teeth. *By Dr. Susan Maples*

Q: I am a first-time mom and I have just scheduled an infant dental examination. He has no teeth yet so I'm curious about what to expect?

A: The infant dental experience will be a great surprise for you. The American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry recommends your first visit between 6 months and one year old. It will center on education and risk assessment for you as parents. So if dad (or another family member) is involved in physical care of your child, it will be valuable for both of you to attend, along with your baby.

Beginning with the baby's health history, you will discuss any foreseen dental complications or anomalies that you might anticipate. Next, you will address diet and nutrition as it relates to good dental health. We will look at your family's eating patterns as well as the effects of nursing versus formula feeding, juice intake and other sugary beverages, tooth friendly versus non tooth friendly snacks and *frequency* of sugar intake.

Your child's teeth calcify before eruption and incorporate fluoride for strength and protection. In this visit, we will address the adequacy of systemic fluoride intake from drinking water and prescribe any necessary supplements.

Oral habits that might alter the eruption or position of teeth and bone are important factors in your baby's development. Thumb/finger sucking and pacifier use can play a negative role in sucking/swallowing patterns, lip closure, speech development and cosmetic distortion. By helping you identify such effects, we can together create a suitable plan for intervening at the appropriate time.

Dental trauma has long term ramifications so we want to work with you on injury prevention. We will talk about common household risk factors and what to do if you should experience a trauma accident involving the teeth and/or face.

"Normal" oral development and tooth eruption patterns are often a mystery to parents. We can answer questions about what you might expect throughout your infant and toddler's growth. This will help you recognize conditions that are not normal and need professional assessment.

Last, but not least, we will work with you on proper oral hygiene skills for you and your child. Cleaning your child's gums and teeth are a team effort—beginning with you. As a child slowly gains some manual dexterity you will little-by-little relinquish responsibility to the child. This progression is extremely important in helping your child develop skills and behaviors for a lifetime of dental health.

The actual examination is done in a knee-to-knee style, where the baby sits on your lap and leans his head back into the hands of your dentist. The dentist will evaluate teeth, gums and soft tissue with a mirror. Your child may cry, making the assessment easier because the mouth is wide open.

If we begin with the end in mind, building a foundation for health will be a recipe for good health in the future for your child.