



American Academy of Pediatrics



DEDICATED TO THE HEALTH OF ALL CHILDREN™

Dental Health — Effects of Pacifiers, Thumbsucking and Diet

If a child sucks strongly on a pacifier, his thumb or his fingers, this habit may affect the shape of his mouth or how his teeth are lining up. If a child stops using a pacifier by 3 years of age, his/her bite will most likely correct itself. If a child stops sucking on a pacifier, his thumb or his fingers before his permanent front teeth come in, there's a chance his bite will correct itself. If your child continues his sucking habit after his adult teeth have come in, then orthodontic care may be needed to realign his teeth.

Sweets like candy or cookies can lead to tooth decay. Sugar from fruits and fruit juices left on the teeth for a long time is not healthy for teeth. Frequent sipping on drinks such as fruit juices and sodas can also cause tooth decay. Starchy foods, such as crackers, and sticky foods and candies, such as raisins, fruit roll-ups and gummy bears, tend to stay on the teeth longer. These foods also are more likely to lead to tooth decay.

Starches and fruits, however, are a necessary part of any child's diet. To avoid tooth decay, give your child these foods only at mealtime (before the teeth have been brushed). For healthy teeth, offer your child a well-balanced diet with a variety of foods. Drinking water with fluoride is an excellent way to keep teeth healthy.

During regular well-child visits, your child's pediatrician will check his/her teeth and gums to make sure they are healthy. If your child has dental problems, your child's pediatrician may refer him/her to a dental professional.

A pediatric dentist specializes in the care of children's teeth, but some general dentists also treat children. Pediatricians may refer children younger than 1 year to a dental professional if the child:

- Chips or injures a tooth or has an injury to the face or mouth.
- Has teeth that show any signs of discoloration. This could be a sign of tooth decay.
- Complains of tooth pain or is sensitive to hot or cold foods or liquids. This could also be a sign of decay.
- Has any abnormal lesion (growth) inside the mouth.
- Has an unusual bite — the teeth do not fit together right.

Regular dental checkups, a balanced diet, fluoride, injury prevention, habit control, and brushing and flossing are all important for healthy teeth. Starting children off with good dental habits now will help them grow up with healthy smiles.