

# From Bump to toddler

Strong baby teeth are a great start to your baby's overall health and play an important role in how your child's social and emotional development and how he/she learns to chew, talk, and have a bright smile.



**Y**our baby's tooth buds begin to develop at around 6 weeks in gestation, and at birth, they have all their baby teeth, (10 upper and 10 lower jaw), nesting in the gums. Whether you are nursing or bottle feeding, it's good practice to wipe your baby's gums after feeding and before nap/bedtime with a clean damp, soft cloth to remove bacteria.

As soon as the first tooth appears, around 6 months, use a soft toothbrush and water and gently brush the baby's teeth and gums twice daily, at night before bed and in the morning.

It may be easier to brush infant and toddler teeth with your child lying back on a bed with their chin lifted slightly up. This position is often more comfortable for the child and allows the parent to see the teeth better.

It's not necessary to use toothpaste for children under 2 years of age unless advised by a dentist. As teeth appear make sure to brush every surface of each tooth including the outside, inside, and the flat biting surface. Lift your baby's lips out to brush the front teeth near the gums. As more teeth come in, it will take longer to brush, about 2 minutes. Use a pea-size amount fluoride toothpaste of at least 1,000 ppm from 2 years, as fluoride helps make teeth stronger.

## What causes tooth decay?

Tooth decay is caused by bacteria present in saliva bathing teeth and gums. Bacteria eat sugars found in most foods and drinks, to form acid, which can make a hole in the tooth over time. Teeth can decay quickly if sugar is eaten frequently, and teeth are not brushed. To prevent tooth decay, reduce the amount and how often your child eats sugary foods and drinks.

## Teething

Babies can become irritable and restless when teething. However, teething does not cause a baby to become ill, so any sick child should be seen by a doctor. Signs of teething include red flushed cheeks, baby seems cranky, has sore gums and dribbles a lot or chews their fists or toys more than usual. To ease discomfort, allow your baby to chew on a clean, cold teething ring and avoid ointments which numb gums unless recommended by your doctor or dentist.

## Soothers?

Not all babies want or need soothers. If you are breastfeeding your baby, ask a health professional for advice before giving your baby one, especially in the first weeks of feeding.

Best advice is not to place the soother in your mouth before you give it to your baby, because you are sharing your bacteria, especially if you have a cold sore or infection. It is also advised not to dip the soother into sugar, jam, or honey.

Using a soother (recommended orthopedic) during active daytime (playtime) can disturb speech development, like babbling, and making sounds and sucking a soother or a finger can change the position of your baby's teeth. Help your child to give up the soother or thumb as soon as possible. This can be done from one year of age advice is available from [www.mychild.ie](http://www.mychild.ie).

## Bottle and Sippy cups

Sucking on a bottle or a Sippy cup with formula, milk or sweet drinks adds to the contact time your child's teeth has with sugar and can cause tooth decay, especially if teeth are not brushed twice daily. It is best to finish feeding before putting your baby to bed. Even milk can cause decay if a baby is let sleep with it in its mouth.

Encourage your baby to drink from a free flow Sippy cup, one with no valve, from 6 months, and then move to an open cup. It will take many months to teach your baby to drink from an open cup as he/she learns how to move from a sucking action (bottle and Sippy cup) to a free flow and then to an open cup. From 12 months onwards, continued

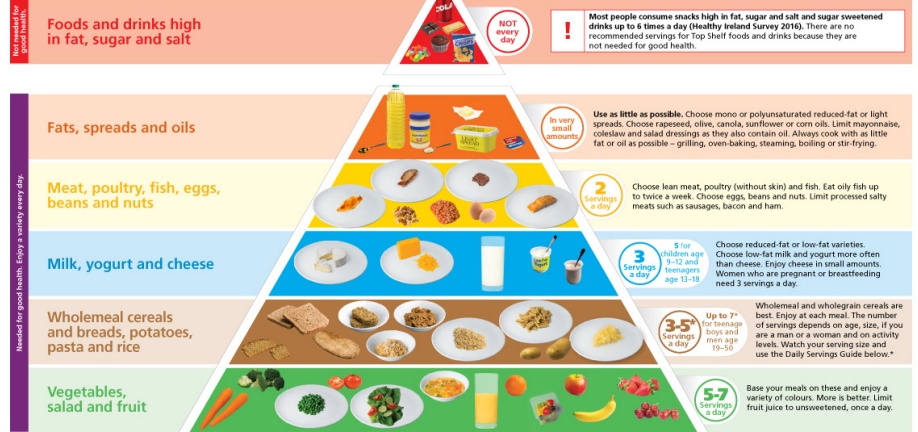
### Teething gels and pain relief

General oral pain relief gels are not suitable for young children. Sugar-free teething gels are available over the counter from the pharmacy - they contain a mild local anaesthetic that helps numb any (remove 'any' as that may not be the case) pain. These are for babies older than 4 months. If you do decide to use a gel, make sure you use a teething gel that's specially designed for young children. Speak to your public health nurse, doctor, or pharmacist for further advice.

Some unlicensed homeopathic gels advertised on the internet have been linked to serious side effects and are not safe to use in young infants and babies.

## The Food Pyramid

For adults, teenagers and children aged five and over



use of bottles or Sippy cups with valves, where the baby is still sucking, greatly increases the risk of getting tooth decay.

## Healthier snack & drinks from 6 months

Many processed foods (packaged) are high in sugar. Your child is not born with a sweet tooth, however, offering sweet snacks can lead to a 'sweet tooth' and may cause them to refuse healthier foods. Sweet drinks, e.g., juices, drinks with added sugar, flavoured milk and flavoured water, sweetened yoghurts and fizzy drinks can damage your child's teeth. You may not be aware that dried fruit and honey are high in sugar and stick to baby teeth. Reducing both the amount and the frequency your child has sugar throughout the day will help reduce the risk of tooth decay. Milk and tap water are the best drinks. Healthy snack options include wholemeal crackers, natural yoghurt, cheese, and fresh fruit and veg cut into bite sized pieces.

## Healthy Meals

The best meals for your baby are those made from simple fresh ingredients with no added sugar or salt. Try to introduce a wide variety of healthy food to your baby from 12 months onwards. Some

foods and drinks have hidden sugars, e.g., tomato ketchup, pasta sauces, fromage frais and some breakfast cereals. Always read the food ingredient label on the package. The child food pyramid is always a good guide to foods to give your child. The Children's Food Pyramid safe food.

It is recommended to take your child to the dentist from a young age. They will get used to visiting the dentist and will find it a more pleasant experience than waiting to visit due to a painful tooth! You can also check for signs of decay by lifting your child's top lip, if you notice any changes, white or brown marks or holes on their teeth, visit the dentist quickly, as early stages of tooth decay can be reversed.

There are excellent FAQ's in caring for your child's teeth aged 0-5 years on the Dental Health Foundation website: <https://www.dentalhealth.ie/children-oral-health/infants/faq-caring-for-your-childs-teeth/>

**Free oral health cards are available to download from [www.dental-health.ie/resources](http://www.dental-health.ie/resources). Follow us on Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn. Email: [info@dentalhealth.ie](mailto:info@dentalhealth.ie)**



Orlaith has been CEO of the Dental Health Foundation for the past 5 years. Prior to this, she held the CEO role in Children in Hospital Ireland, and Imagination, the Dublin Children's Museum.