



## Infant and Toddler Oral Health

Caries is the disease that causes cavities. It is an **infectious disease** that is transmitted from parents (most likely Mother) or caregiver to the child. The bacteria in the Mother's mouth is passed on to the baby through sharing utensils, food, kissing or cleaning the pacifier with your own mouth before giving it to your baby. It attaches to the gums even before the teeth erupt and will not only affect baby teeth, but also the permanent teeth that are forming under them. That is why it is important for parents and caregivers to maintain good oral health to prevent transferring the bacteria to their child. This knowledge allows dental professionals and parents to work as a **team** in order to prevent cavities throughout life.

### **THINGS YOU CAN DO TO PREVENT EARLY CHILDHOOD CARIES:**

- Never put a baby in his/her crib with a bottle or sippy cup. When sleeping, tooth-decay causing sugars can pool in his/her mouth for hours, causing what is known as "tooth bottle decay."
- If you are nursing, wipe your baby's teeth with a damp washcloth or xylitol wipes such as Spiffies after you are done. Avoid using the bottle or breast as a pacifier!
- Wean your baby off the bottle between the ages of 12 and 18 months old. You can introduce your baby to a sippy cup with water at about six months of age. This way, drinking water becomes a good habit.
- The best way to avoid decay is to have your child finish the drink within 20 minutes. Do not let your child walk around with a bottle or sippy cup all day long.
- In order to avoid the transmission of decay-causing bacteria, avoid using the same spoon to taste and feed your baby or cleaning a pacifier in your own mouth before passing it to your child.
- Limit sugar intake, even before your baby gets teeth! The sugar is fuel for the bacteria in your child's mouth. The bacteria produce acids that will attack tooth enamel. If you give your baby fruit juice, make sure it is diluted (50% water/50% juice) and no more than six ounces daily. Milk, formula and breast milk are especially harmful if given too frequently or at bedtime. Switch to water instead.
- Fluoride reduces the incidence of early childhood tooth decay. At age two you can start using a pea-size amount of toothpaste with fluoride, but make sure you wipe the teeth before your child rinses to prevent ingestion.
- Bring your child for his/her first dental visit by the first birthday or six months after the first tooth erupts. We make the first visit fun for the child and it is a great opportunity for you to ask questions about your child's oral health.
- Make sure everyone in the family visits the dentist every six months to insure good oral health and to prevent future problems.

**REMEMBER: Good oral habits should begin at birth so good oral health continues for the rest of our lives!**