

Clean well

Toothbrushing



Key messages

For babies, toddlers and children to achieve good oral health regular cleaning or brushing to remove plaque from the teeth is important.

- Start cleaning teeth as soon as the first tooth appears (usually around 6 months of age, but this can happen earlier).
- Low fluoride toothpaste should be introduced at 18 months of age.
- Standard fluoride toothpaste should be introduced at 6 years of age.
- Clean all surfaces of the teeth and gums twice a day – in the morning and before going to bed.
- Children less than 8 years of age will need an adult to help them brush their teeth.

Rationale

Every baby, toddler and child is at risk of tooth decay. However, regular tooth cleaning/ brushing can remove plaque (the sticky film of bacteria that forms on our teeth) and prevent decay from occurring. The bacteria in plaque use sugar from food and drink to produce acid. Frequent exposure of the tooth surface to the acid increases the risk of holes forming in the teeth over time. Regular toothbrushing to remove plaque helps to maintain healthy teeth and gums. Most children do not have the fine motor skills to brush effectively until they are at least eight years of age. An adult will need to help a child brush their teeth until they are old enough to do it properly by themselves. A good indication of sufficient motor skills to brush teeth is when a child is able to tie their own shoe laces (Dental Health Services Victoria, 2010).

Did you know ...

Baby teeth are softer and more vulnerable to decay than adult teeth so it is important to take care of them. Regular brushing with an age-appropriate fluoride toothpaste is one of the best ways to prevent decay.

Evidence

The effectiveness of twice daily use of fluoride toothpaste in reducing tooth decay has been shown in a number of studies (Roberts-Thomson, 2011). Fluoride strengthens the tooth, making demineralisation less likely. It also promotes remineralisation and disrupts the acid production process (Rogers, 2011). Refer to [Tooth decay](#) for more information about this process.

In 2005 Australian Research Centre for Population Oral Health (ARCPOH) hosted a workshop involving experts from across Australia to review evidence and develop guidelines for the use of fluorides in Australia. The following guidelines relating to toothbrushing for children were adopted.

- From the time that teeth first erupt (about six months of age) to the age of 17 months, children's teeth should be cleaned by a responsible adult, but not with toothpaste.
- For children aged 18 months to five years (inclusive), the teeth should be cleaned twice a day with a low fluoride toothpaste containing 0.4–0.55mg/g of fluoride. Toothpaste should always be used under supervision of a responsible adult, a small pea-sized amount should be applied to a child-sized soft toothbrush and children should spit out, not swallow, and not rinse.
- For people aged six years or more, the teeth should be cleaned twice a day or more frequently with standard fluoride toothpaste containing 1mg/g fluoride. People aged six years or more should spit out, not swallow, and not rinse.
- For children who do not consume fluoridated water or who are at elevated risk of developing caries for any other reason, guidelines about toothpaste usage should be varied, as needed, based on dental professional advice. Variations could include more frequent use of fluoridated toothpaste, commencement of toothpaste use at a younger age, or earlier commencement of use of standard toothpaste containing 1mg/g fluoride. (Spencer, 2006)

Did you know ...

Baby teeth can start to decay as soon as they erupt.

The recent evidence from the *Victorian Child Health and Wellbeing Survey* shows that many children are not having their teeth brushed regularly, nor are they having daily assistance from an adult family member to brush. The report shows that 70 per cent of children aged 2 to 12 years were reported to brush their teeth at least twice a day. Furthermore, only 20 per

cent of children between 6 months and less than 8 years of age had a parent or carer who reported never assisting their child with tooth cleaning. (Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2009). Evidence also suggests that toothbrushing programs in childcare settings are likely to be more cost-effective in areas where children have high tooth decay rates, the water supply is not fluoridated and children are not brushing with low fluoride toothpaste (Rogers, 2011).

Bacteria transmission

A key contributing factor in tooth decay are the bacteria *mutans streptococci* which live in the mouth and on the teeth (refer to [Baby teeth are important](#) section for more information on tooth decay). Cleaning and brushing removes plaque which is required for the bacteria to stick to the teeth. Interestingly, babies are not born with the bacteria. The bacteria are in most cases transmitted to the baby from the main caregiver, usually the mother (Rogers, 2011).

All family members can help reduce the spread of bacteria to babies by doing the following simple things:

- everyone brushes their teeth twice a day with fluoride toothpaste
- everyone uses their own toothbrush
- everyone has a regular dental check-up and any tooth decay treated
- if women are pregnant have a dental check-up before baby is born
- everyone uses their own eating utensils
- clean and sterilise baby feeding bottles, teats and dummies
- avoid cleaning dummies with saliva or mouth.

Age appropriate tooth cleaning and brushing for babies, toddlers and children

Babies can start having their teeth cleaned as soon as they erupt. The following table describes age appropriate cleaning techniques and products to use as described in the Australian oral health consensus messages (Roberts-Thomson, 2011).

Age: 0 – 6 months

Cleaning technique - If teeth begin to erupt before 6 months use a flannel, soft cloth or a soft small-headed toothbrush with water to clean all surfaces of the teeth and gums twice a day. Following the morning feed and before going to sleep in the evening.

Toothpaste - Toothpaste is not recommended at this age.

Toothpaste - An adult family member should always clean baby's teeth.

Age: 6 – 18 months

Cleaning technique - Use a flannel, soft cloth or a soft small-headed toothbrush with water to clean all surfaces of the teeth and gums after breakfast and before bed.

Toothpaste - Toothpaste is not recommended at this age.

Toothpaste - An adult family member should always assist a toddler to brush their teeth.
- At this age they do not have the manual dexterity or skills to do this correctly.

Age: 18 months – 6 years

Cleaning technique - Brush teeth and gums gently and thoroughly using a soft small-head toothbrush designed for children in the morning and at night.

Toothpaste - Low-fluoride toothpaste should be introduced.
- Use a pea-sized amount of low-fluoride toothpaste designed for children from 18 months to 6 years of age, unless otherwise recommended by an oral health professional. It is important for children to spit out any remaining toothpaste. Do not rinse with water as this will remove the fluoride from the teeth.
- For children who are living in areas without access to fluoridated water supply, encourage families to seek advice from a dentist or other oral health professional about whether the child should use a low fluoride toothpaste or standard fluoride toothpaste (DOH 2014).

Toothpaste - An adult family member should always supervise and help a child to brush their teeth until they are eight years old.

Age: 6 years +

Cleaning technique - Brush teeth and gums gently and thoroughly using a soft small-head toothbrush designed for children.

Toothpaste - Children can use regular fluoride toothpaste.
- For children who are living in areas without access to fluoridated water supply, encourage families to seek advice from a dentist or other oral health professional about whether they should use a standard fluoride or higher strength fluoride toothpaste (DOH 2014).

Toothpaste - An adult family member should supervise and check that children are brushing correctly until they are 8 years of age.
- At this age children can brush their own teeth, but supervision is still required.

Toothbrushing

A guide for families – how to brush your child’s teeth (18 months to six years)

- Brush teeth and along the gum line twice a day.
- Children should use low fluoride toothpaste from 18 months until they turn six.
- Children will need an adult to help them brush their teeth until about 7 or 8 years of age.

Steps for toothbrushing include:

1

Put a small pea-sized amount of low-fluoride toothpaste on a soft children’s toothbrush.



2

Sit the child in your lap, facing away from you, or stand behind taller children. Tilt the child’s head back against your body so you can see all the surfaces of the teeth.



3

Brush all outer surfaces: Move the brush in gentle circles to clean the outer sides of the teeth and gums.



4

Brush all inner surfaces: Brush in gentle circles on the inside of the teeth and gums.



5

Brush back and forward on the chewing surfaces.



6

After brushing, encourage your child to spit out the toothpaste, do not swallow it or rinse with water. Not rinsing keeps a small amount of fluoride in the mouth which protects teeth.



Did you know ...

Brushing teeth and gums twice a day decreases the risk of tooth decay.