

Baby Teeth are Worth Protecting

40% of kids in the U.S. have had at least one cavity by the time they reach kindergarten. While tooth decay is largely preventable, this reality has come to be for a number of reasons, including ignorance about the importance of brushing at an early age—41% of parents surveyed believed brushing should start at the age of three—and a lack of dental hygiene products in the home. The worst reason is one that has persisted for generations.

Many parents still believe the myth that baby teeth aren't important.

A child's teeth can not be neglected simply because they will eventually be replaced. Their primary teeth need to last from six to ten years depending on the tooth. A cavity at age three or four should be treated right away. (Ideally, preventing cavities from happening in the first place is always the best plan. See our tips at the end of this post.)

Here are 7 reasons you shouldn't wait for a decaying baby tooth to fall out:

1. Tooth decay gets more expensive to treat the longer you wait.

A small cavity is cheaper to treat than a much larger one because it takes less product and less time to correct. Contacting your dentist as soon as you spot the cavity will almost always cost less in the long run, usually between \$150 to \$300 depending on where you live.

Your dentist may even opt to treat the decay with silver diamine fluoride, which will stop the decay from progressing, if she believes the tooth will

naturally fall out in the near future. This will avoid more costly procedures later and will prevent the spread of infection to nearby teeth.

If the cavity is left unchecked it could reach the pulp and root before the tooth is ready to be shed, which could lead to a costly root canal or trip to the emergency room. The average cost of a root canal ranges from \$600 to \$1,400 plus the cost of a crown, which usually run around \$1,000 and are NOT covered by most state-funded dental plans.

2. Tooth decay hurts. A lot.

Once the cavity reaches the inner nerve of the tooth the pain can be excruciating. Kids who suffer from tooth decay lose sleep and have a hard time eating. The pain can also cause difficulty concentrating at school—if they make it to school at all. Dental diseases are one of the leading causes of absenteeism and lead to two million missed school days each year.

Some parents believe that a cheaper option may be to simply have the decaying tooth pulled instead of filled. Your dentist will likely advise



against this for two reasons:

3. The early loss of teeth affects speech development.

We don't often think of teeth when it comes to talking, but they are essential for young children to speak clearly. Losing teeth—especially the front upper or lower teeth—before the age of three can cause speech impairment that can last into later years.

4. Missing teeth may lead to costly orthodontic treatment later on.

Another function of primary teeth is to hold space for the permanent teeth that will eventually replace them. Whether the tooth is lost to decay or extraction, early loss can cause adult teeth to come in crooked and need expensive orthodontic treatment. Crooked teeth are more than unsightly, they can also cause pain, speech problems and are more difficult to keep clean.

5. Untreated tooth decay leads to bone loss and a lifetime of dental expenses.

When a baby tooth is left untreated, the cavity can spread to the adult tooth beneath it or, if the child is very young, to the bone that holds the tooth in place. This permanent damage can lead to a lifetime of costly dental treatments.

6. Infection from cavities can spread to other parts of the body.

Tooth decay is caused by an infection. The bacteria that cause tooth decay can infect the bloodstream and have been linked to other diseases including heart disease, diabetes, stroke and some forms of cancer. In some cases the infection can even spread to the brain. Sadly, this was the case for 12-year-old Deamonte Driver. The dental care he needed was delayed for so

long that he ended up in the hospital for six weeks and needed two surgeries that ultimately failed to save his life.

Although cases like this are rare, these types of infections send 61,000 people to the hospital each year and result in 66 deaths.

7. Ignoring cavities teaches kids that having them is normal. It's not.

When parents believe the myth that cavities in baby teeth aren't important, their kids grow up believing it too. Kids need to learn that, although cavities are common, they are not normal, and they are easy to prevent.

Kids that don't learn to brush for two minutes, two times every day and visit their dentist two times each year will grow into adults with unhealthy mouths. Adults with poor oral health often struggle with other health complications and limited job prospects.

The good news is, by establishing healthy dental hygiene habits at an early age, kids can live free of dental decay and the expensive care that is needed to treat it.

Cavities do not have to be part of childhood. Kids can be proud of their healthy smile and avoid the pain and embarrassment of decay.

For tips to help your child maintain a healthy smile throughout the childhood and links to other educational resources, visit the link at the top of this article.

Want more great oral health tips and resources?

Get a smile in your inbox! Sign up for one of our fun and informative, quarterly newsletters at AmericasToothFairy.org.



As a resource provider, America's ToothFairy increases access to oral health care by supporting nonprofit clinics and community partners delivering education, prevention and treatment services for underserved children. We work to ensure all children can access dental care and learn about oral health. Learn more at AmericasToothFairy.org. Copyright 2021.
