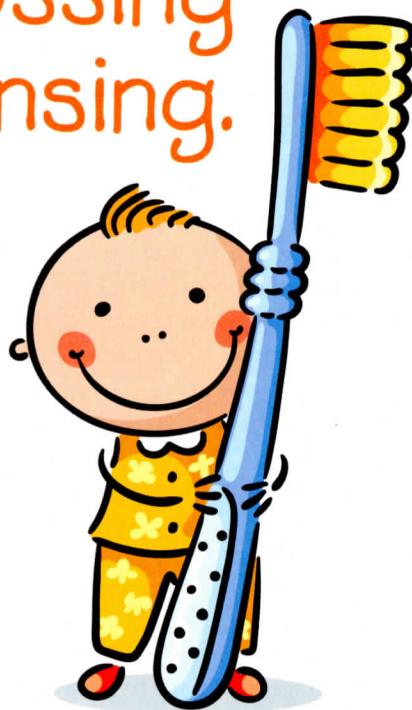


Brushing and Flossing and Rinsing.

Oh my!



What parents need to know about kids' oral health care

By Jennifer D. Foster

It's probably not news to any parent that regular toothbrushing and flossing, combined with routine dental visits, are key to healthy teeth and gums. But with an awe-inspiring array of dental products available on every drugstore shelf, does it make a difference as to what kind of toothbrush or floss you buy for the kids? And, what may be news to parents (especially those first-timers) is that “practising good oral hygiene habits need to start long before you buy a toothbrush for that child,” says Dr. Rick Caldwell, ODA President-Elect, who maintains a busy dental practice in New Liskeard, Ont.

Newborns and infants: Some new moms and dads may think that no teeth equals no brushing. Not according to Dr. Jerry Smith of Thunder Bay, Ont., and ODA Vice-President. “For babies without teeth, their gums should be wiped with a clean, soft cloth moistened with water, after every feeding.” This accustoms baby to having her mouth cleaned and sets the stage for toothbrushing — once the little one has teeth.



When to brush?

As soon as baby's first tooth appears, Mom or Dad can brush it carefully using a toothbrush with a very small head and soft, rounded bristles, advises Dr. Smith. "Use plain water and no toothpaste, unless there is a level of caries [decay] risk, as determined by your dentist. In that case, an amount the size of a small grain of rice may be used." Once children are over the age of three, "a fluoridated toothpaste can be used twice daily by Mom or Dad to brush their kids' teeth, using an amount similar to the size of a small green pea," he says. "And ensure the child is able to spit it out."

How long a parent is the sole brusher of the child's teeth varies. ODA President Dr. Arthur Worth, of Thamesville, Ont., says the ability of a child to brush unassisted depends on his or her motor co-ordination skills. "Most children, regardless of their enthusiasm for brushing, simply don't have sufficient dexterity to allow them to effectively clean all the tooth surfaces, until six to eight years of age." And that's precisely why adult supervision is crucial. According to the Canadian Dental Association, your child is ready to do an effective job brushing when she or he can write (not print) his or her name.

So, manual or electric?

Manual toothbrushes, in general, tend to have smaller brushing heads than the electric spin-type brushes, accessing the harder-to-reach areas more easily. But, for some children, "the novelty of a brush that spins may get them to brush longer and, thus, a better job is potentially done," says Dr. Caldwell. And, he says "an electric toothbrush could be recommended when there are dexterity issues (that is, an electric brush might be easier to hold) or when the device will help mitigate some behaviour issues." But, warns Dr. Caldwell, "the potential con of some electric brushes is that the child could actually damage teeth or tissue, if she presses too hard or long in one area."

What about those electric brushes that play music? "Part of the training that goes with the musical brush is that the child will learn how long it takes to brush her teeth properly. If that is learned, it's a very inexpensive but valuable lesson," says Dr. Caldwell. Dr. Worth agrees, adding: "Anything that encourages good oral hygiene is a great idea. Electric toothbrushes offer initial greater uptake and usage, but, as with most items, there's an initial peak use and then familiarity will often lessen interest, in the long run." Over time, he says, "either brush type is effective."

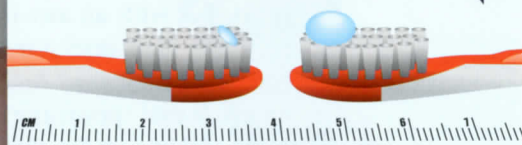


Look for a toothbrush with a child-sized head and handle, and one with soft, round bristles. As the child grows, so, too, must the size of the brush. When in doubt, smaller is usually better. Overall, "just getting any toothbrush, be it manual or electric, in the child's mouth is helpful," stresses Dr. Caldwell.

Regardless of whether a manual or an electric brush is used, children should brush (with supervision) or have their teeth brushed twice daily. And remember, stresses Dr. Smith, "all toothbrushes need to be changed at least every three to four months and immediately after any sickness."



How much?



A small rice-sized portion of toothpaste on the left — and a portion the size of a small green pea on the right.

Source: Canadian Dental Association website:
www.cda-adc.ca

Flossing 101

Flossing should begin as soon as your child's teeth are touching. "These are areas where plaque will accumulate, and the bristles of the brush cannot reach; hence, common areas for decay," says Dr. Smith. Dr. Worth concurs: "Once a child's teeth start to fit closely together, usually between the ages of two and six, parents should get their children in the habit of flossing daily."

But, because flossing requires more manual dexterity than using a toothbrush, younger children will need to have their teeth flossed by a parent, states Dr. Caldwell. "You can teach children with good hand dexterity how to floss using regular floss at varying ages; for others, you can teach them how to use aids, like floss picks and floss wands." But are all flosses created equal? The flavour doesn't matter; although, flavoured floss may increase the taste appeal. What does matter, says Dr. Caldwell, is what material the floss is made from. "Some flosses are a plain, twisted fibre that can shred in tight contacts; others are waxed to help prevent shredding. And others are made from a more high-tech material that slides through tight contacts, with no shredding and few breakages." Ultimately, "flossing is a valuable preventative dental measure," stresses Dr. Worth. "Just floss the teeth you wish to keep!"

Mouth rinses and mouthwashes: What's the difference?



As with toothbrushes and flosses, a wide variety of mouthwashes and rinses flood the oral hygiene shelves. But are they necessary? "Children, typically, do not need to use a mouth rinse, unless the child, through a caries



[decay] risk assessment by his or her dentist, is determined to be of moderate to high risk of dental caries," advises Dr. Smith. And "what we are talking about here are fluoridated mouth rinses that do not contain alcohol and are used daily or weekly that are very effective at reducing the incidence of dental decay, when used correctly," he adds. If the dentist decides that a fluoride rinse is a necessary part of your child's oral hygiene regimen, your child must be able to rinse for a period of time, then spit the rinse out. "This is typically somewhere around the age of six," says Dr. Smith.

What about mouthwashes or rinses that contain alcohol for kids? Drs. Worth, Smith and Caldwell all agree they're an absolute no-no for children.

When it comes to home care, "the goal is to limit materials used only to those that are specific to the needs of the child," says Dr. Ian McConnachie, a pediatric dentist in Ottawa and ODA Past President. "This becomes more relevant these days, as there are more toothpastes and mouth rinses with additional additives for different therapeutic purposes. This underscores the need for open communication between dentist and patient."

And regardless of which brush, floss, toothpaste or rinse is used, "every child should visit a dentist by age one year or when the first teeth appear," says Dr. Smith. "Dental caries is a disease that is, by and large, preventable with regular home care, proper nutrition and regular visits to the dentist."

Toothpaste

Are all toothpastes created equal? Look for the Canadian Dental Association's Seal of Recognition when selecting a toothpaste, advises Dr. Smith. ■



Top 5 Tips

For Getting Your Child to Brush and Floss Every Day

It's no secret that getting kids to brush and floss regularly can be a struggle. Here are your best bets for getting your child into a daily dental hygiene routine:

- 1 Provide a good example for your child by having him see you brush and floss your teeth twice a day.
- 2 Have your child brush earlier in the evening, when snacks are finished, instead of right before bed. Children are more awake and tend to do a better job.
- 3 Instead of using a timer, have your child choose her favourite song, then brush to get rid of the "sugar bugs" until the song is over.
- 4 Let your child pick out the toothbrush, toothpaste and dental floss, as long as all three are age-appropriate.
- 5 Create a rewards chart. For example, after two full weeks of regular brushing and flossing, decide on a treat (not food-related) such as an afternoon at the zoo, staying up a little later on the weekend or watching a new or favourite movie together.



The best rewards, however, aren't found on a chart: fewer cavities, healthy teeth and gums, and a beautiful smile!