

Baby's First Tooth Means Time for the Dentist

When baby's chubby, toothless grin turns pouty from the pain of new teeth, parents begin wondering about that first trip to the dentist.

Many parents put off making the appointment, believing that it's not really necessary until later or hesitating because they don't think young children will tolerate time in the dentist's chair. So when is the right time to go?

According to Scott Navarro, DDS, a national oral health advisor for Delta Dental Plans Association, "As a general guide, we recommend bringing a child in for his or her first dental checkup after the eruption of the first tooth but no later than the child's first birthday. Scheduling the first appointment at a young age is a great way to catch oral health problems early, and it also helps the child get acquainted with the dentist and dental office."

Whether conducted by general or pediatric dentists, checkups for young children are usually quick and easy. Most appointments last between 15 and 30 minutes and include gentle, comprehensive examinations of the teeth, gums, jaws, bite and oral tissues. During the exam, the dentist or hygienist will discuss home-care methods, evaluate habits such as thumb sucking and identify your child's fluoride needs. Depending on your child's age and tolerance level, the appointment might also include cleaning and polishing the teeth, applying a topical fluoride, and x-rays.

Dr. Navarro adds that another important reason to get children in for early dental visits is to watch for baby bottle tooth decay. A leading cause of cavities in young children, this type of decay occurs after frequent, long-term exposure to sugary liquids. Children who are given a bottle or sippy cup of milk or juice at naptime or bedtime are generally at the highest risk for baby bottle tooth decay.

For parents of children who are fidgety, shy around strangers or generally unpredictable, Dr. Navarro offers reassurance that dentists usually do everything they can to make the first visit a good one.

"Many dentists will allow children this young to sit on parents' laps during exams, and they'll often offer rewards such as stickers and toothbrushes afterwards," says Dr. Navarro. "We want children to grow up feeling good about the dentist and their oral health."