

SproutSmile

Kids' Cavity-Prevention Guide

Simple daily habits that keep little teeth healthy



A free parent guide from SproutSmile - sproutsmile.com

SproutSmile helps you find a pediatric dentist for your child, free and in your language. We are not a dental office and this is not medical advice.

How to prevent cavities in children

Small daily habits can make a big difference. Here's a simple parent guide to lowering your child's chance of cavities, from baby teeth through school age.

Cavity prevention starts early

Cavities are common in children, but many can be prevented. The basics are simple: clean the teeth well, use fluoride, watch how often your child has sugary drinks and snacks, and keep up with regular dental visits.

Baby teeth matter. They help your child eat, speak, and hold space for adult teeth. A cavity in a baby tooth can still hurt, lead to infection, and make eating or sleeping hard.

Many dentists recommend a child's first dental visit by age 1 or within 6 months of the first tooth coming in. If you have questions about timing, learn what happens at a first visit or talk to a licensed pediatric or general dentist.

The everyday habits that help most

Brush your child's teeth twice a day. Use a soft toothbrush and fluoride toothpaste. For children under age 3, many dentists suggest a tiny smear of toothpaste. For ages 3 and up, a pea-sized amount is commonly used. Parents usually need to help with brushing for years, even when a child wants to do it alone.

Floss once teeth touch each other. If food and plaque get stuck between teeth, a toothbrush cannot always reach those spots. Floss picks made for kids can make this easier for some families.

Fluoride helps make teeth stronger and lowers the risk of cavities. It may come from toothpaste, drinking water, or fluoride treatments at the dental office. Sealants can also help. These are thin protective coatings that dentists place on back teeth to help keep out food and germs. A licensed pediatric or general dentist can tell you what makes sense for your child.

Food, drinks, and sippy cups

Sugar matters, but timing matters too. Teeth are at higher risk when a child sips or snacks on sweet things all day long. Juice, sports drinks, flavored milk, soda, sweet tea, and sticky snacks can all raise the chance of cavities.

Water is usually the best drink between meals. If your child has juice, many families find it helps to keep it small and serve it with a meal instead of letting a child sip it for a long time. Going to bed with milk, juice, or any sweet drink in a bottle or sippy cup can be especially hard on teeth.

A sippy cup can be useful for a short stage, but long-term sipping can keep sugar on the teeth. Try to move toward regular cups as your child is ready. If your child wants a drink while falling asleep

or overnight, plain water is usually the safest choice. For personal guidance, talk to a licensed pediatric or general dentist.

What parents can do by age

Before teeth come in, you can gently wipe your baby's gums with a clean, damp cloth. Once the first tooth appears, start brushing twice a day.

Toddlers and preschoolers usually need hands-on help. A good routine is to let your child try first, then you do the careful brushing after. Many parents use a two-minute song, a stool at the sink, and the same morning-and-night schedule every day.

For school-age children, keep checking brushing even if they seem independent. Look at the back teeth. Those grooves can trap food easily. Ask the dentist about sealants when permanent molars come in.

Teens still get cavities too, especially with sports drinks, energy drinks, frequent snacking, braces, or rushed brushing before bed. A reminder on the mirror or phone can help more than another argument.



Sealants & cavity prevention

Sealants, fluoride, cleanings, and check-ups are simple ways to help protect your child's teeth before problems start. Many preventive visits are covered by insurance, Medicaid, or CHIP for eligible families.

What sealants and cavity prevention mean

Preventive dental care is the care that helps stop cavities before your child needs a filling. It often includes regular check-ups, cleanings, fluoride treatment, and dental sealants. These services are common in children's dental visits and can lower the chance of tooth decay.

Sealants are thin protective coatings that a dentist places on the chewing surfaces of back teeth. Those teeth have deep grooves where food and bacteria can get stuck. The coating helps block those spots. Fluoride is different. It helps strengthen tooth enamel and can make teeth more resistant to cavities.

Baby teeth matter, even though they fall out later. They help your child eat, speak clearly, and hold space for adult teeth. Keeping baby teeth healthy can also help your child avoid pain, missed school, and bigger dental visits later.

Many dentists suggest a first dental visit by age 1 or when the first tooth comes in. After that, regular check-ups help the dentist watch how your child's teeth are growing and catch small problems early. If you want help choosing an office, you can read how to choose a pediatric dentist.

What happens at the visit

A preventive visit is usually simple and fairly quick. The dentist or hygienist may count your child's teeth, look for early signs of cavities, check the gums, and talk with you about brushing, flossing, snacks, and drinks. They may also take X-rays when needed, depending on your child's age, cavity risk, and what the dentist can see during the exam.

A cleaning usually means removing plaque, polishing the teeth, and showing your child better brushing habits in a calm way. Fluoride treatment is often brushed onto the teeth or placed as a foam, gel, or varnish. It is fast. Some children say it feels sticky or tastes a little sweet for a short time.

Sealants are usually painless. The tooth is cleaned and dried. Then the dental team puts on a special liquid that helps the sealant stick, rinses or dries the tooth again, paints on the sealant, and hardens it with a blue curing light. No drilling is usually needed for a sealant on a healthy tooth.

Some children do best with extra time, breaks, or a very gentle introduction to the visit. Pediatric dentists are trained to work with children of different ages and comfort levels. If your child is especially anxious, talk to a licensed pediatric or general dentist about what support options they

offer.

How to prepare your child

A little preparation can make the visit easier. Use simple, calm words. You might say, “The dentist will count your teeth and make sure they are strong and clean.” For sealants, you can say, “They may paint a special tooth coat on the back teeth to help keep food out.” Try not to promise there will be no strange sounds or feelings. It is better to say the team will explain each step and help your child feel comfortable.

Pick an appointment time when your child is usually in a good mood. For many younger children, morning works better. Bring comfort items if that helps, like a stuffed toy or headphones. If your child has sensory needs, trouble sitting still, or high anxiety, tell the office before the visit so they can plan.

At home, keep the routine simple. Brush as usual. If the office gives eating or drinking instructions, follow those. If not, a light meal beforehand is often easier than arriving hungry and upset. Avoid using the dentist as a threat. That can make fear worse.

Parents often feel nervous too. That is normal. A calm voice and a short explanation usually help more than a long speech. If you are looking for a child-friendly office, we can help you find a dentist.

Typical cost ranges and coverage

Costs vary by office, plan, and area, so these are general estimates, not quotes. A routine exam and cleaning for a child may range roughly from about \$75 to \$250 without insurance. Fluoride treatment may be around \$20 to \$60. Sealants are often charged per tooth and may range from about \$30 to \$80 per tooth. X-rays can add to the total when they are needed.

Many children’s preventive visits are covered in part or in full by dental insurance. Medicaid and CHIP also cover children’s dental services for eligible families, including preventive care, though details can vary by state and by plan. Some offices accept Medicaid, and some do not, so it helps to ask before you book.

Even when a service is covered, there can still be limits, waiting periods, or frequency rules. For example, a plan may cover cleanings twice a year or sealants only on certain teeth and at certain ages. Ask the office to explain what they expect your plan to cover and what you may owe.

If cost is one of your biggest concerns, our costs guide can help you understand common dental charges and what questions to ask before the visit.



Baby teeth & early dental care

Baby teeth do a big job. Early dental care helps protect your child's smile, comfort, speech, and eating habits from the very start.

Why baby teeth matter

Baby teeth are not “just practice teeth.” They help your child chew food, learn clear speech, and hold space for adult teeth to come in later. When baby teeth get cavities or are lost too early, it can affect comfort, sleep, eating, and the way adult teeth come in.

Early dental care is about simple prevention and helping your child get used to the dentist in a calm way. A first dental visit is usually recommended by age 1, or within 6 months of the first tooth coming in. If you are not sure when to go, talk to a licensed pediatric or general dentist.

This stage also includes everyday habits at home. Teething, cleaning new teeth, fluoride, snacks, bottles, sippy cups, thumb-sucking, and pacifiers can all affect dental health. Small routines now can make a real difference over time.

What early dental care includes

For babies and toddlers, dental care is usually gentle and short. The dentist may look at how your child's teeth are coming in, check the gums, and watch for early signs of cavities or spots on the teeth. They may also talk with you about brushing, fluoride, feeding habits, and what is normal for your child's age.

At home, early care often means wiping the gums before teeth come in and then brushing twice a day as soon as the first tooth appears. Use a small, soft toothbrush. For fluoride toothpaste, ask a licensed pediatric or general dentist what amount is right for your child's age and needs. Fluoride and sealants are tools dentists use to help prevent cavities.

Parents also ask about teething. Teething can mean drooling, chewing, and fussiness, but every child is different. A dentist can explain what to watch for and when mouth changes may need a closer look.

Thumb-sucking and pacifiers are common too. Many young children stop on their own, but if a habit lasts longer, it can affect tooth position or bite. A dentist can tell you what is common by age and when it may be time to work on stopping.

What to expect at the first visit

A first visit is often more about getting comfortable than doing a lot of treatment. The dentist or hygienist may ask about your child's feeding habits, bottle or nursing patterns, pacifier use, thumb-sucking, brushing routine, and whether anyone in the family has had a lot of cavities. You do not need to share medical history on our site. If a dentist needs health details, they will ask you

directly in their office.

For many babies and toddlers, the exam is done with the parent close by. Some offices use a knee-to-knee position, where your child starts in your lap and gently leans back so the dentist can see the teeth. The dentist may count the teeth, check the bite, and look for early decay. They may clean the teeth if needed and may suggest a fluoride treatment.

X-rays are not always needed at the first visit. It depends on your child's age, cavity risk, and what the dentist sees. If your child ever needs more than a routine visit later on, dentists may discuss options like nitrous oxide, sometimes called laughing gas, or sedation. Those are decisions to review directly with a licensed dentist.

Most first visits are short. The main goal is to help your child and you learn what healthy teeth look like and what to do next.

How to prepare your child

Keep it simple. You can say, "The dentist will count your teeth and make sure they are clean and healthy." Short, cheerful words often work better than a big build-up. Try not to promise there will be "no pain," because even a normal cleaning can feel strange to a young child.

If possible, book the visit at a time of day when your child is usually fed and rested. Bring comfort items if that helps, like a favorite toy, blanket, or cup. If your child is very young, bring anything you may need for a diaper change or snack after the visit.

At home, let your child see you brush your own teeth. You can practice opening wide, counting teeth, and taking turns with the toothbrush. This makes the visit feel more familiar. If your child cries during the appointment, that does not mean the visit went badly. Many little children cry because the setting is new.

If you are looking for an office that works well with babies and toddlers, our guide to choosing a pediatric dentist can help.



Your quick action list

- 1 Decide what your child needs (first visit, cleaning, a worry, or an emergency).
- 2 Get matched, free, with pediatric dental offices near you at sproutsmile.com.
- 3 Ask each office whether they accept your insurance or Medicaid/CHIP.
- 4 Ask how they work with children and what a visit will cost.
- 5 Choose the office that feels right - you make every decision about your child's care.



Find a pediatric dentist near you, free, at sproutsmile.com