



BREASTFEEDING & YOUR BABY'S SMILE: WHAT MUST BE KNOWN



August 2026



Breastfeeding is one of the greatest investments parents can make in their child's health. While its nutritional, immune, and emotional benefits are widely recognised, fewer parents realise that breastfeeding also plays a vital role in healthy oral development. From supporting jaw growth to reducing the risk of tooth decay, breastfeeding lays the foundation for a healthy smile that can last a lifetime. Here's what every parent should know.

How Breastfeeding Supports Healthy Dental Development

1. Encourages Healthy Jaw and Facial Growth

Breastfeeding requires babies to use a coordinated pattern of tongue, jaw, lip, and facial muscle movements. This natural exercise stimulates proper development of the jaws, facial bones, and oral muscles, creating adequate space for teeth to erupt correctly and supporting a healthy bite. Children who are breastfed are less likely to develop certain orthodontic problems later in life because their oral structures develop more naturally during infancy.

2. Helps Reduce Bite Problems

Research has shown that babies who are exclusively breastfed for at least six months are significantly less likely to develop open bites, crossbites, and overbites. The natural sucking motion during breastfeeding promotes proper tongue positioning and nasal breathing, both essential for healthy facial growth.

3. May Lower the Risk of Early Childhood Tooth Decay

Early Childhood Carie (ECC) is one of the most common chronic diseases affecting young children worldwide, yet it is largely preventable. Research has demonstrated that exclusively breastfed children generally experience lower rates of tooth decay than those who are exclusively formula-fed. Breastfeeding also supports the establishment of a healthy oral environment and may help reduce exposure to cariogenic feeding practices during infancy. Current evidence suggests that breastfeeding for up to 12 months has a protective effect against early childhood caries when combined with good oral hygiene practices.

Breastfeeding Alone Does Not Prevent Cavities

Although breastfeeding offers many oral health benefits, breast milk naturally contains sugars. This means that breastfed babies can still develop tooth decay if good oral hygiene is neglected. As teeth erupt, plaque bacteria interact with sugars in the mouth to produce acids that can damage tooth enamel. For this reason, establishing healthy oral care habits from an early age is essential.





Simple Steps to Protect Your Baby's Smile

Parents can help safeguard their baby's oral health by following these simple recommendations:

- Clean your baby's gums from birth. Before teeth appear, gently wipe the gums with a clean, damp cloth or gauze after feeds to remove bacteria.
- Begin brushing as soon as the first tooth erupts. Use a soft baby toothbrush and a smear of fluoride toothpaste no larger than a grain of rice. Brush twice daily.
- Be mindful of night-time feeding. Once complementary foods have been introduced, frequent overnight feeding without cleaning the mouth may increase the risk of tooth decay.
- Schedule your child's first dental visit early. The South African Dental Association recommends a dental examination by the child's first birthday, or within six months after the first tooth appears.

What Does the Evidence Tell Us?

Current scientific evidence supports breastfeeding as part of a healthy start for lifelong oral health. Research indicates that:

- Breastfeeding for up to 12 months is associated with a lower risk of early childhood caries.
- Exclusive breastfeeding during the first six months supports healthy jaw and facial development.
- Breastfeeding may reduce the likelihood of developing certain orthodontic problems later in childhood.
- Prolonged breastfeeding beyond 24 months, particularly when accompanied by frequent night-time feeding and inadequate oral hygiene, may increase the risk of tooth decay.

The key message is clear: breastfeeding offers significant oral health benefits, but these benefits are maximised when combined with good oral hygiene and regular dental care.

A Healthy Smile Starts with the Whole Family

Parents' oral health also plays an important role in protecting their baby's teeth. The bacteria responsible for tooth decay can be transferred from caregiver to child through shared utensils, cleaning a pacifier with the mouth, or other forms of saliva contact.

Maintaining your own oral health by brushing twice daily with fluoride toothpaste, flossing regularly, attending routine dental examinations, and addressing dental problems promptly helps reduce the risk of transmitting cavity-causing bacteria to your child.





Takeaway

Early prevention is one of the most effective ways to ensure lifelong oral health. By combining breastfeeding with good oral hygiene practices, healthy nutrition, and regular dental check-ups, parents can help their children enjoy healthy smiles well into adulthood.

This World Breastfeeding Week, remember that every feed contributes not only to your baby's overall health but also to the development of a strong, healthy smile.

References

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