



## Dental Expert Q&A: Tips to Foster Healthy Dental Habits in Kids

Parenting a child comes with endless questions. One that might not be on your mind is when to start your child's oral hygiene routine, including when to schedule your child's first dentist appointment.

You can set the stage for your child's good oral health before the first tooth even comes in. Dr. Jeffrey Chaffin, Delta Dental of Iowa's Dental Director, answers top questions about when and how to help your child establish strong dental hygiene habits.

### Q: When should children begin brushing and flossing?

**Dr. Jeffrey Chaffin:** Oral care should start right away. Before the first tooth erupts, you can wipe your child's gums with a clean, soft, wet cloth. This will start the good oral hygiene habit.

We recommend that you begin brushing your child's teeth as soon as the first tooth erupts. Use a soft toothbrush with water at first. You can add toothpaste once the child is comfortable with the toothbrush. Up until age 2, use just a very small smear of fluoridated toothpaste. After age two, the amount of toothpaste can increase, but only a pea size is appropriate through age 6.

Flossing can be a little more difficult, but it is important to clean between the teeth—a place that the toothbrush can't reach. After age 2, try to introduce flossing once a day. The child can start to take over this task at about age 10, or once they develop the hand skill to be able to do this on their own.

### Q: When do you recommend children begin seeing a dentist?

**Dr. Jeffrey Chaffin:** We strongly encourage parents to have the first dental visit for their children by age 1 or within six months of the first tooth erupting. The first dental visit can be rather quick, but it is important to help identify any problems early on and to start the proper preventive care for your child.

### Q: What's your advice to parents wondering whether they should take their child to a pediatric or general dentist?

**Dr. Jeffrey Chaffin:** Pediatric dentists have had additional training in treating the special needs of children. They are always a good choice as a dental provider for your child.

Many general dentists also treat children, but remember that it's most important to start the dental care early. If your general dentist is uncomfortable with very young children, ask if they may recommend a pediatric dentist in your area.

**Q: What's your best advice to help kids protect their dental health?**

**Dr. Jeffrey Chaffin:** Brushing twice a day is the most important habit that children can develop. Parents should do the brushing and transition to supervising when the child displays the ability to brush. As the child shows independence, parents can allow the child to brush once a day, and the parent can brush the other time.

Whatever encourages the child to brush is advantageous. Fun timers that show how long a child should brush and inexpensive electric toothbrushes can be helpful, if they motivate the child to brush.

Although it is almost impossible to avoid sugary drinks and foods, limiting them in your child's diet is an important part of oral and overall health as well.

**Is it time to make an appointment for your child?** Delta Dental of Iowa's [Find a Provider](#) tool is a great place to start your search for your child's dentist.

## Why Do Some People Get Cavities More Than Others?

"No cavities!"

It's a phrase everyone enjoys hearing at the end of a dental exam. But, for some people, cavities—the common term for tooth decay—are an all too familiar part of their oral health picture.

Why do some people struggle with tooth decay while others avoid it entirely?

First, it's important to understand that cavities are extremely common. In fact, 97% of the population will experience one at some point in their lives. So, if it seems a new cavity crops up between each dental visit, you're not alone. Tooth decay is something most people have, and the risk factors below help shed light on why that's the case.

**We're eating too many sweets too often**

Sugar feeds the bacteria that forms cavities, so sugar consumption has long been linked to tooth decay. But did you know that it's not so much the amount of sugar you consume that's as crucial to cavity formation as how often you consume it? In other words, a daily habit of one sugary drink each day could lead to more cavities than an occasional indulgence of cookies at a holiday party. If you have a strong sweet tooth, make sure to swish some water around your mouth to clear the sugar away from your teeth—or, better yet, brush and floss after your sweet treat.



### **It's in your genetics**

You can control how much sugar you consume, but you can't control your tooth structure and enamel strength. Some people are born with teeth that have deeper crevices, which make it easier for cavities to form. If your teeth structure makes you vulnerable to decay, your dentist may recommend sealants for an extra layer of cavity prevention.

People born with softer enamel are also prone to cavities, as enamel protects the inside of your teeth from decay. The harder the enamel, the more protection it provides. Soft enamel will more easily succumb to cavity-causing bacteria.

### **Your saliva plays a role, too**

The substances in your saliva and amount you produce are influenced by both genetics and lifestyle factors. Saliva contains a mix of minerals that support a process called remineralization, which prevents cavities, and this blend of minerals is determined by your genetics. However, how much saliva you produce can shift based on your diet, the medications you take, even snoring plays a part in how much you produce. Saliva helps ward off the bacteria that causes tooth decay, so the less saliva you produce, the higher likelihood of cavities.

**The key to cavity prevention and management?** Seeing your dentist twice each year. Regardless of how often you get cavities, it's crucial to keep regular dental visits to identify and address any areas of tooth decay as early as possible.