

## How to get your kids to brush their teeth (and more)

When it comes to oral health in kids, Emily Isom has seen it all.

Cavities, gum disease and infections, improper tooth alignment and tooth loss come to mind quickly. Not to mention all the missed school time dealing with these issues.

But she's also seen plenty of young people who are the picture of good oral health. And she's on a mission to make more of the latter.

"The mouth is the gateway to the body," says Isom, a certified medical assistant in pediatrics at OSF HealthCare and a former dental assistant.

"A lot of people don't think about what our oral health can do to us if it's not being taken care of," she adds. "It can cause heart disease, diabetes and respiratory infections."

### Everyday prevention

Isom says kids and their parents should commit to daily habits that will improve their oral health.

For infants without teeth, Isom says parents should use a soft, cool washcloth to wipe the child's gums twice a day. This helps clear bits of food and milk that can lead to bad breath, irritation and cavities.

"Touching their gums will help when they are older. They'll be okay with brushing their teeth. They won't fight the parents about it," Isom says. "So, it's good to start [oral health care] early.

Older kids should brush their teeth for two minutes, twice a day. Floss once a day. When a child has two teeth that touch, it's time to start flossing. That could happen from ages two to six.

Before you rinse out your mouth with water, don't forget about the tongue, Isom says.

"If we do not brush our tongue, bacteria can sit on it. It can get what I call 'tongue sick,'" Isom says. "Bad breath can also happen."

Outside of the bathroom, Isom reminds us that sugary and starchy food and drinks are prime suspects in oral health issues like cavities. So, parents should offer those foods in moderation. Isom calls out sticky candy as an example. She says the sugar tends to sit on your teeth for a while. Isom also says starchy food like bread, potatoes, rice, pasta and cereal can sit between your teeth unless you floss right away.

Another must-know for parents with babies: don't put your baby to bed with a bottle. Aside from a choking hazard, Isom says the constant stream of milk or formula can lead to cavities and corrosion. She also says this can cause infants to be fussy and demand a bottle more often.

### It takes some convincing

A mother of a six-year-old, Isom knows that some kids won't brush and floss willingly. They see it as a chore.

Her response: make oral health fun.

"Make a dental chart. Add stickers to it, morning and night," Isom suggests. "Give them rewards like a little toy. After each cleaning, they can get a reward. Turn on music or a timer for two minutes [of brushing.] Get toothbrushes with their favorite characters on them."

## **Dentist visits**

Isom says children usually have regular visits with a dentist twice a year. Others with known mouth issues may go every three to four months. But see a dentist right away if you notice red flags: pain in the mouth, persistent bad breath, discolored gums or teeth, bleeding gums or trouble swallowing.

A regular dental visit usually includes a thorough cleaning of the teeth and gums followed by fluoride treatment.

"[Fluoride] protects the enamel of the teeth," Isom explains. "It protects your teeth from cavities. It just makes your enamel really strong so you can eat the things you want."

A dental professional may also perform X-rays on your teeth regularly.

Something else for parents to make sure the dentist has in mind: oral cancer screening.

"Those are huge," for oral health, Isom says.

A dentist may use their hands to examine your mouth and neck. They could use a light or have you rinse your mouth with a blue dye. Each method looks for abnormal, possibly cancerous tissue.

At the end of a dental visit, you may be sent home with a prescription or just instructions to keep your mouth happy. For example, you may get a prescription mouthwash to help with gum disease.

## **Learn more**

Read more about how to keep kids' mouths in good health on the [OSF HealthCare](#) and [U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) websites. If you don't have a family dentist, talk to your primary care provider about finding one. [OSF HealthCare Children's Hospital of Illinois](#) in Peoria offers dental care for children with special needs.