

Oral Health Care Tips for: **Children with Special Health Care Needs (CSHCN)**

Oral health is related to the overall health and well-being of children and adults. Oral health affects nutrition, growth, speech, chewing, swallowing, appearance and learning. Baby teeth are important! Some baby teeth stay in the mouth until the child is 12 years old or longer. Teeth are important to the child's eating and speaking. They also hold the space and guide the permanent teeth into place. Untreated dental decay in baby teeth can lead to infection which can harm the permanent teeth underneath. Infection in baby teeth and permanent teeth can spread and affect the child's overall health.

Daily Care:

- Tooth decay and gum disease can be prevented with proper dental care including brushing at least twice a day and flossing once a day.
- Don't forget to brush all parts of the teeth (front, back, tops, at the gums) and brush the tongue. Bacteria hide in the grooves of the tongue.
- Always use a toothbrush with soft bristles. A harder toothbrush can cause damage to the teeth and gums. Change the toothbrush every 3 months or when the bristles begin to lose shape.
- You should use only a small amount of fluoride toothpaste on the toothbrush, the size of a small pea or a kernel of corn. For children under 2 years old, the amount of fluoride toothpaste should only be the size of a grain of rice.
- If toothpaste causes gagging or the child refuses toothpaste, try brushing the teeth by wetting the toothbrush with a small amount of over-the-counter fluoride mouth rinse (such as ACT) instead.
- Floss both sides of all teeth that are close to each other.

Positioning and Adaptations:

- Oral health care of CSHCN is just like the other personal care routines you help your child with. It takes patience and sometimes creativity.
 - Try to use the same time, place, and position when possible to create a daily dental routine. Start with small steps, until the child gets used to you working in their mouth.
 - When positioning, support the child's neck so that you can see in the mouth. This may require standing, sitting on the bed or floor, using pillows, using a bean bag, or tilting the wheelchair (with wheels locked) back against you. If gagging is a problem, be careful not to tilt the head too far back.
 - If the child has trouble keeping the mouth open for oral hygiene care, try using tongue depressors taped together or a sterilized rubber door stop for a mouth prop.
- Toothbrushes and floss holders can be adapted to fit your child's specific needs. For instance:
 - Enlarge the toothbrush handle with a tennis ball or bicycle grip.
 - Bend the toothbrush handle by heating the handle (not the bristles) with hot tap water.
 - Extend the handle by taping a ruler to it.
 - Order/buy specially adapted toothbrushes just for special needs.
 - Try a battery-operated toothbrush for toddlers or older.

Fluoride:

- Fluoride helps prevent tooth decay in two ways: systemic and topically.
 - Systemic (swallowed and helps the enamel as the tooth is forming):
 - If you have well water, you should have your water tested for fluoride levels. If your water is too low in fluoride, check with a physician or dentist to determine if your child needs a prescription for fluoride drops or tablets.

- If you routinely use bottled water, also check the amount of fluoride (usually available on the internet).
- Topical (applied to the outside of the teeth and strengthens the teeth present in the mouth):
 - Home - Fluoride toothpaste, fluoride mouth rinse, fluoridated water
 - Dental or medical professional – Fluoride gel, foam, or varnish

Visiting the Dentist:

- Children should see a dentist as soon as they have teeth or by their first birthday. The dentist will look for anything abnormal and discuss the prevention of dental diseases. Many dentists don't see children until the age of three, but this can be too late!
- To find a dentist for CSHCN:
 - Ask your dentist or call pediatric dentists and general dentists from the yellow pages and ask if they treat children with the particular health care need your child has.
 - Ask your physician, family, or a friend if they know of a dentist to refer you to.
 - Call or check the website of:
 - The Virginia Department of Health, Division of Dental Health
www.vahealth.org/dental/ (list of dentists that see CSHCN coming soon)
 - The American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry 1-312-337-2169
www.aapd.org/finddentist/
 - If your child has Medicaid, call Smiles for Children 1-888-912-3456
www.dmas.virginia.gov/dental-home.htm
- Share with the dentist and staff what works for you when providing dental care for your child.
- Bring items that soothe your child: a favorite toy, favorite music, etc.
- Common dental problems of CSHCN that may be discussed with the dentist: grinding teeth, large amounts of drool, dry mouth, reflux or vomiting, broken teeth, medications that make the teeth dark or have sugar, bad breath, swollen face or gums, mouth sores, bleeding from the mouth, crowded or crooked teeth, injuries to the mouth

Feeding/Diet:

- The bacteria that causes dental diseases can be transmitted from an adult to a child. Avoid sharing spoons/forks, straws, food, or anything that goes in your mouth.
- Infants and toddlers who are put to bed with a bottle should only have water in the bottle. Milk, formula, breast milk, juice, and other sweetened drinks can pool around the teeth and cause cavities. After the last breastfeeding or bottle feeding for the night, the teeth should be wiped or brushed.
- Even if there are no teeth present, the gums should be wiped clean to remove the film of bacteria and food. This also helps get the baby used to you working in their mouth.
- Frequently sipping from the training cup all day will keep the teeth bathed in sugars and lead to cavities. Limit milk or sweet drinks to mealtime. Use water or unsweetened drinks between meals.
- Some CSHCN are unable to clear food from their mouth due to poor muscle control. As soon as possible after eating, wipe out their mouth with a wet gauze or clean wet cloth.
- CSHCN often have specialized diets like soft foods, high calorie foods, or frequent sugar sweetened medicines. Soft foods tend to stay in the mouth longer so keep the mouth wiped out or brush more often. Talk to your dentist and physician about using non-sugar sweeteners to avoid tooth decay.
- Avoid using sugary snacks or drinks for rewards or in between meals.

