

"I never thought to worry about it. I figured I'd worry about his teeth when he started getting wiggles," Allison McClellan of Kalamazoo, Ind., says about her 8-month-old son, Matthew. "But then I started getting brochures about baby gums and realized what I needed to do and what could happen if I didn't."

Caring for new-onset teeth in the infant stage is pretty simple — use a wet washcloth or gauze to rub your baby's gums, tongue and lips after each feeding to remove plaque and, say dentists, don't to have done with a milk or juice bottle.

"It's easy to tell someone they shouldn't put their baby to bed with a bottle in his mouth, but as the mother of a 10-month-old I know that's not always practical," says Dr. Elisa Mello, a pediatric dentist in New York City. "If your baby needs a bottle to get to sleep, introduce a water bottle instead of milk. As for cleaning his mouth, I don't always get to do it immediately. Sometimes, he falls asleep and I have to do it then. But I know firsthand that wiping his gums makes an unbelievable difference in keeping his mouth clean."

Unfortunately, as soon as teeth start coming in, they can become decayed. One of the most common causes is baby bottle tooth decay, which happens when babies are allowed to nurse continuously or sleep with a bottle of milk, juice or sugar water. The liquids break down into sugar pool around the baby's teeth during sleep and cause them to decay.

"It's essential for your baby chew candy all night, and letting them sleep with a bottle is doing basically the same thing to their teeth," Dr. Mello says. "People think babies can't get cavities, but they can. A 5-month-old can have dental decay."

In fact, 20 percent of all children younger than age 5 have cavities, according to Dr. Hines. "That didn't just start when they were 2 years, 11 months old. That decay had been building up for years," Dr. Hines says.

She also points out that when a baby has decay, they have an infection. "A child

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dental dangers

Why taking care of baby's teeth starts now

by Lisa Hurt Kozarovich

With a newborn in the house, parents have a whole lot of new health concerns — from whether Baby is developing appropriately to worrying that he may become allergic to the family pet. What many parents don't realize, say pediatric dentists, is the importance of their baby's dental health.

"It's important to start worrying because from the month long before the teeth show up," says Dr. Michael Wilby, a pediatric dentist with the Children's Medical Center in Dallas, Texas. "You become concerned that decay before a baby even has teeth can be detrimental to the incoming teeth. A few minutes cleaning the mouth with a washcloth works wonders."

Not only does caring for your baby's mouth before her teeth come in help ward off bacterial infections and future decay, but it also gets her accustomed to having her mouth cleaned and begins establishing a habit of good oral hygiene, says Dr. Mary J. Hines, a pediatric dentist in Chicago, Ill., and a spokeswoman for the American Dental Association. Cleaning your baby's mouth, which considers the soft tissue, can even help develop muscles in the mouth that are important in speech development later on, she says.

Once a baby begins the stage of caring for newborns, the importance of baby and hygiene is a message that parents are being exposed to more frequently. >